



This is a digital copy of a book that was preserved for generations on library shelves before it was carefully scanned by Google as part of a project to make the world's books discoverable online.

It has survived long enough for the copyright to expire and the book to enter the public domain. A public domain book is one that was never subject to copyright or whose legal copyright term has expired. Whether a book is in the public domain may vary country to country. Public domain books are our gateways to the past, representing a wealth of history, culture and knowledge that's often difficult to discover.

Marks, notations and other marginalia present in the original volume will appear in this file - a reminder of this book's long journey from the publisher to a library and finally to you.

Usage guidelines

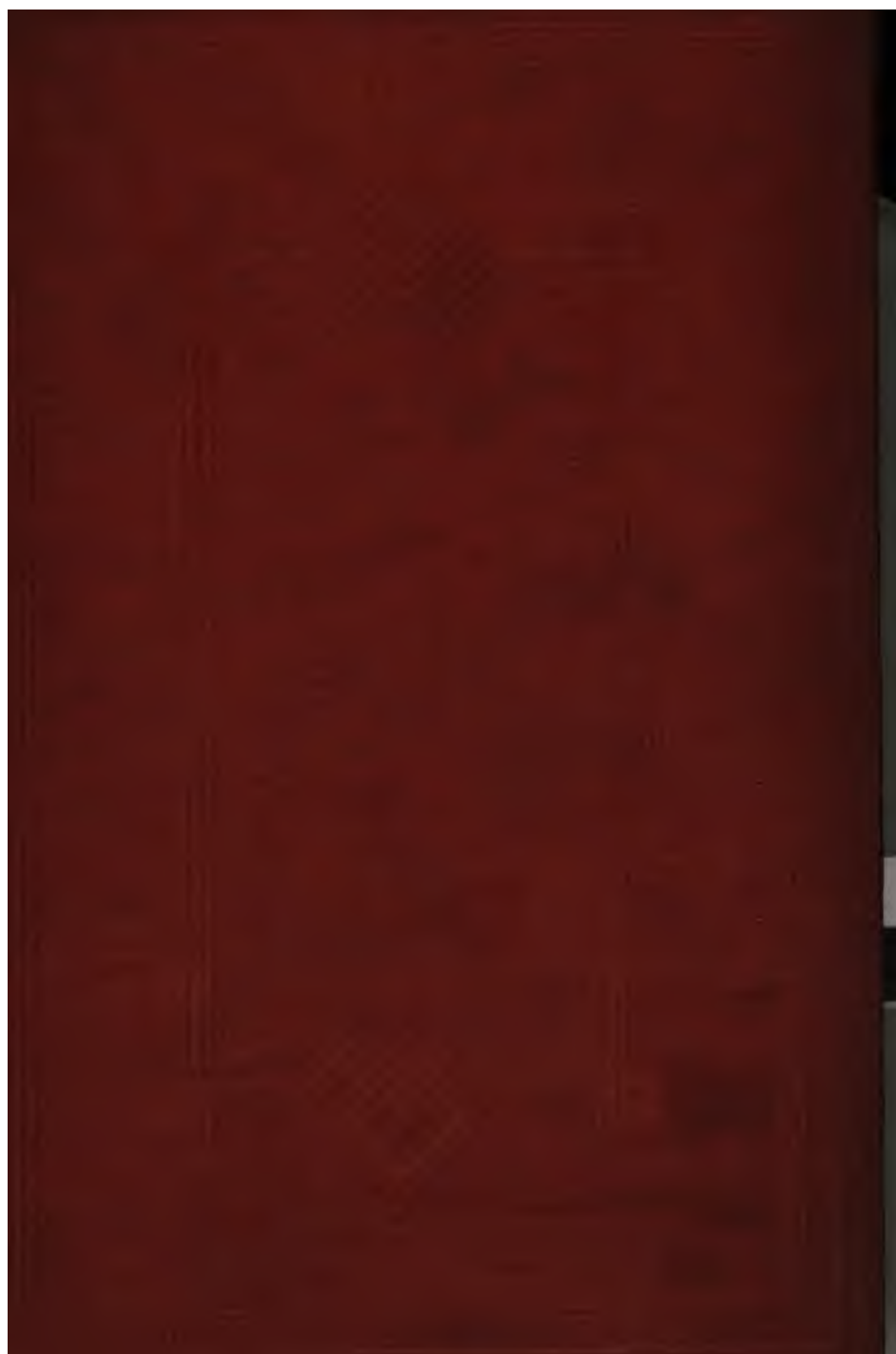
Google is proud to partner with libraries to digitize public domain materials and make them widely accessible. Public domain books belong to the public and we are merely their custodians. Nevertheless, this work is expensive, so in order to keep providing this resource, we have taken steps to prevent abuse by commercial parties, including placing technical restrictions on automated querying.

We also ask that you:

- + *Make non-commercial use of the files* We designed Google Book Search for use by individuals, and we request that you use these files for personal, non-commercial purposes.
- + *Refrain from automated querying* Do not send automated queries of any sort to Google's system: If you are conducting research on machine translation, optical character recognition or other areas where access to a large amount of text is helpful, please contact us. We encourage the use of public domain materials for these purposes and may be able to help.
- + *Maintain attribution* The Google "watermark" you see on each file is essential for informing people about this project and helping them find additional materials through Google Book Search. Please do not remove it.
- + *Keep it legal* Whatever your use, remember that you are responsible for ensuring that what you are doing is legal. Do not assume that just because we believe a book is in the public domain for users in the United States, that the work is also in the public domain for users in other countries. Whether a book is still in copyright varies from country to country, and we can't offer guidance on whether any specific use of any specific book is allowed. Please do not assume that a book's appearance in Google Book Search means it can be used in any manner anywhere in the world. Copyright infringement liability can be quite severe.

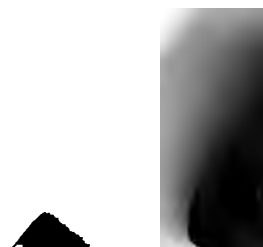
About Google Book Search

Google's mission is to organize the world's information and to make it universally accessible and useful. Google Book Search helps readers discover the world's books while helping authors and publishers reach new audiences. You can search through the full text of this book on the web at <http://books.google.com/>





600064735V



BY BIRTH A LADY.

LONDON:

ROBSON AND SONS, PRINTERS, PANCRAE ROAD, N.W.

BY BIRTH A LADY.

A Tale.

BY

GEORGE MANVILLE FENN,

AUTHOR OF 'MAD,' 'WEBS IN THE WAY,' ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. II.



LONDON:

TINSLEY BROTHERS, 18 CATHERINE ST., STRAND.

1871.

[All rights reserved.]

250. B. 22

7

CONTENTS OF VOL. II.

CHAP.	PAGE
I. CLOUDS AT THE COURT	I
II. NELLY A CORRESPONDENT	12
III. REVERSED PROCEEDINGS	18
IV. THE 'CANDLESTINE' INTERVIEW	32
V. MR. MAXIMILIAN BEGINNETH TO SHOW HIS HAND	39
VI. THE NEW HOME	54
VII. MRS. BRANDON'S RECEPTIONS	61
VIII. MRS. BRANDON'S RECEPTIONS: FIRST VISI- TOR	68
IX. MRS. BRANDON'S RECEPTIONS: SECOND VISI- TOR	81
X. MRS. BRANDON'S RECEPTIONS: THIRD VISI- TOR	97
XI. KITCHEN CANVASSING	110
XII. MORE PASSION AND LITTLE PROGRESS	131
XIII. FOR ANOTHER CAMPAIGN	143
XIV. A NEW HOME	149
XV. THE YOUNG LADIES	160
XVI. CHANGE OF SCENE	168
XVII. PRIVATE INQUIRY	176

CHAP.	PAGE
XVIII. SECOND-HAND	185
XIX. AT CRESCENT VILLAS	192
XX. A RIVAL ENCOUNTER	200
XXI. (—?—)	211
XXII. ACCIDENT OR DESIGN?	220
XXIII. NELLY'S CONFIDENCE	233
XXIV. MR. WHITTRICK AGAIN	242
XXV. COMING ROUND	252
XXVI. TREMBLING	260

BY BIRTH A LADY.



CHAPTER I.

CLOUDS AT THE COURT.

‘WELL, Charley my boy,’ said Sir Philip Vining, a few mornings after, ‘you must keep the ball rolling. You are going along swimmingly. But ladies like plenty of attentions. What are you going to do next? Can’t you get up something fresh? Don’t spare for money, my boy: I’ve—that is, we’ve plenty, you know; and I like to be lavish as far as the income allows. It’s an old-fashioned idea of mine, Charley, that it is the duty of a landlord, deriving a handsome revenue from a neighbourhood, to

spend that revenue liberally in his district. It's no waste, you know; it is all distributed amongst the people, and does some good. By the way, though, I think you might be a little more attentive to Laura. She's a fine girl, Charley: perhaps a little too masculine; but it's surprising how love and matrimony soften down that class of women. I saw you with her yesterday along with that Miss Bedford or Rutland—which was her name?

‘Bedford,’ said Charley quietly.

‘To be sure—Bedford,’ said the old gentleman; ‘and the children. Seems a very ladylike young person. I was rather taken with her nice, sad, gentle face. One can almost read trouble in it. Pity a girl like her should have to lead such a life as that of a governess!’

Charley was silent; and Sir Philip, seeing him thoughtful, took up the paper.

And indeed Charley Vining was thoughtful and troubled in mind. He had encountered Ella twice since the day of the fête, to find her cold and distant. But then she had been in the company of Laura. All the same, though, it struck him as strange that the haughty beauty should have taken it into her head to accompany her in her walks: it looked like supervising her actions; and again and again Charley reverted to Nelly's warning, and longed for a few words with her; but so far it was in vain. He had called twice, to meet Laura and Mrs. Bray, Max having returned to town. His reception had been most flattering, and there was a gentle, retiring way with Laura that troubled him; for he felt that he must be giving her pain, and his was too generous a disposition to suffer in peace the knowledge that he was causing others trouble or care. But call or walk,

save in the society of Laura, neither Nelly nor Ella could be seen; and leaving Sir Philip immersed in the day's news, Charley left the room, went round to the stables, and had his mare saddled.

Still no luck. He did not even see them that day; and time slipped by without fortune smiling upon him. He called again and again at the Elms; but Nelly and her governess were always invisible, while Laura was still more gentle and retiring. Once he asked to see Nelly, and she was fetched down, evidently longing to take him into her confidence; but opportunity was not afforded; and at last one morning, with the feeling strong upon him that Laura was playing a part, and that he was being debarred from seeing Ella alone, Charley sat listening to the pleasant banter of Sir Philip over the breakfast-table, till, seeing his son's moody looks, the old gentleman

became serious; for his conversation had all turned upon Charley's visits to the Elms, and his great love for woodland and meadow rambles.

'Why, my dear boy,' Sir Philip had said, 'I'd no idea that I was going to make such a solemn fellow of you. Certainly matrimony should be taken *au sérieux*; but I'm afraid the lady is hard to win.'

A few minutes after Sir Philip rose; for Charley had turned uneasily in his chair, so that his face was averted.

'My dear Charley,' said the old gentleman, going round the table, and making the young man start as he felt that loving hand laid upon his shoulder,—'my dear Charley, I have hurt your feelings in some way. Pray forgive me.'

Charley groaned.

'My dear boy,' said Sir Philip, 'what

does this mean? Surely my old-womanish babbling has not upset you like this! It was only lightly meant. Or is there something wrong?’

Charley turned his face to his father’s for an instant, but only to avert it again.

‘Is it anything to do with money, Charley?’ said the old gentleman. ‘But pooh—nonsense! It isn’t that, I know. Your personal expenses are ridiculously small. Why, I expected that by this time you would have half ruined yourself in jewelry presents. What is it, Charley? Can you not confide in me?’

‘No, father,’ cried Charley, starting angrily to his feet, and overturning his chair; ‘I have been showing you for the past month that I cannot. But I can stand this no longer,’ he cried, striding up and down the room; ‘for it is not in my nature to play the hypocrite!’

‘Hypocrite, Charley! My dear boy, what is it?’

‘What is it!’ exclaimed Charley fiercely. ‘You think that I am going day after day to some assignation with that—that—that—with Laura Bray!’

‘Good heavens, Charley! what does this mean?’

‘Mean, father! Why, that I am a hypocrite, and deceiving one who has always been generous and kind. It means, too, that my life has been turned to gall and bitterness; for I am going about like some puling boy, seeking in vain for a kind word from the woman who has robbed me of all that seems bright in life.’

‘But, Charley, what does this mean? I thought—I felt sure—’

‘Yes,’ cried Charley bitterly; ‘and I was so mean, so base and contemptible, as to let you believe that I loved Laura

Bray, and ask her here, as if—Heaven forgive me!—I blushed for my love for a woman who—There, I can't talk of it—I can't enter into it. Father, why did you stop the even tenor of my life? But no!' he cried, as he recalled his first meeting, 'it was not your doing. I am half mad with disappointment, and know not what I say. A few weeks ago, and I could mock at the word Love, while now it is as though something was robbing me of sleep by night, rest by day, and my old zest for life. Father, I tell you I love—and love almost madly—a woman who rejects my suit, who turns from me, while every effort to see her now seems to be frustrated.'

'But, Charley,' cried the old man, his hands trembling with agitation, as, following his son about the room, he sought to drive away the suspicion that was beginning to enlighten him, 'who is this lady?

You are too timid—too diffident. Surely no one we know would refuse *you*. Pooh! my dear boy, you have taken the distemper almost too strongly,' he continued, with a forced laugh. 'But who is it?—one of the Miss Lingons?'

Charley turned angrily upon him, as if suspecting him of banter, but only to see truth and earnestness in the old man's troubled countenance.

'Father,' he said calmly, 'I love Ella Bedford.'

'Who? Miss Bedford?' cried the old man excitedly. 'You are joking with me, my boy,' he said huskily; 'and it is ungenerous, Charley. You know how I have set my mind on this—on your marriage—our pedigree, my son, our ancient lineage. Think, Charley, of your position.'

'I do, father,' said Charley sternly.

'But, my boy,' exclaimed Sir Philip an-

grily, 'it is madness! You, soon to be a baronet, with one of the finest rent-rolls in the county, and to stoop to a governess !'

'To a lady, father!' cried Charley fiercely now, as he stood facing Sir Philip. 'You told me you wished me to marry. Can I govern my own heart? I told you once that I did not believe so good and pure a woman as my dear mother lived on this earth. I retract it now, and own, father, that it was said in the blind ignorance of my foolish conceit; for I know now that there are women walking this lower earth of ours whom I cruelly calumniated, for they might be taken as the types of the angels above. Father, I love one of these women with a strong man's first fierce love—with the passion long chained, now almost at your bidding let loose, and before heaven I swear that—'

'For heaven's sake be silent, Charley,

my dear child !' cried Sir Philip almost frantically, as he laid his hand on his son's lips.

Then with a groan he shrank away, staggered to his chair, and buried his face in his hands, while with face working, brow flushed, and the veins standing out in his forehead, Charley stood struggling between the two loves, when he turned; for the door opened, and the servant handed to him a letter that made his face flush a deeper hue.

CHAPTER II.

NELLY A CORRESPONDENT.

CHARLEY VINING took the letter with trembling hand from the silver salver upon which it lay, glancing the while at the superscription, written in an awkward scrawly character, as if the sender had been possessed of a wild unbroken colt of a pen, which would shy and buck and dart about as it should not; but as well as if some one had been present to whisper to him that that letter contained trouble, its recipient knew it, and hesitated to tear open the envelope. He gazed at the address once more, then at the bent figure of his father, and took a step forward to speak — but no, he could not. He felt half

unmanned, and that his words would be choked in their utterance; and turning hastily round, he hurried from the room, his last glance showing him Sir Philip with his face still covered by his hands; and Charley's heart smote him as he thought of the pain he had inflicted upon that noble heart.

Unintentionally, upon hurrying out of the house, Charley made his way to the part of the grounds where stood the rose-tree from which he had plucked that blossom—the spot where he had told his love, believing that it fell only upon the ears he wished, but all the same in the presence of three witnesses—the false and the true. But the roses were gone—only a few brown withered petals yet clung to the branches; and recalling how Ella had fled from him, he once more threw himself into the garden seat, and with an effort tore open the letter.



And then he could not read it; for the characters swam before his eyes, till savagely calling himself 'Girl!' 'Idiot!' and setting his teeth firmly upon his nether lip, he read as follows:

'MY OWN DEAREST CHARLEY VINING,—
This is not a love letter, though I do indede love you very much indede (and those are both spelt wrong; only if I smudge them over and alter them, they will be so hard to read). I do love you very much indede, though not in that way, you know, but as I should love brother Max if he wasn't such a donkey. I've been wanting to speak to you so *verry, verry, verry* bad, but Laury has watched me and Miss Bedford just like two mice (I mean like a cat, only my eyes are so swelled up with crying that I don't hardly know what I'm saying or doing), and I have such a lot to tell

you, enough to brake your hart, and I'm speling this worse and wors, though Dear Miss Bedford took such pains with me, and it's all about her I want to talk to you, only I won't say what, in case you don't see this yourself. So you must please come and meet me to-night in Gorse Wood, and it won't be rong, for I'm only a girl and a child; yet sometimes though I can't help feeling womanish, and feeling half and half too. But you always did play with and pet me, Charley, and i know you love somebody else verry much, and so do I, so that it won't be wrong, only candlestine. Mind and come at 7, whilst they're at dinner, and I shall tell Milly and Do that I'm going to get some pairs. So plees to fill both of your pockets verry full of those early ones, same as you gave me last year. And plees excuse all mistakes, for i write in a great hurry, and don't forget to come,

for I've got to tell you all about some one you gave the rose to when you thought No one was looking.

'Mamma and Papa desire their best compliments, and with best love, i am, deer Charley Vining,

'Youre affectionate friend,

'NELLY SOPHIA BRAY.

'P.S. That's all nonsense about Ma and Pa sending their complements, only it slipped in, and if I smudge it out, the letter looks so bad; and it don't mater, does it? for I haven't got time to write another letter, only don't forget to come.'

Charley Vining was too troubled at heart to smile at poor Nelly's letter, as, doubling it back into its former folds, he sat wondering what news the girl could have for him. He did not like the idea of obeying her wishes, but he felt that he

must go : the hints the letter contained were too strong to be resisted. If they were seen, what would it matter after all? for Nelly was but a child, he told himself—the great tomboy whom he had romped and played with again and again. There was something about it, though, that he did not like, but a re-perusal of the letter decided him ; and more for a means of passing the time than for any other purpose he went round to the stables, and mounting his favourite, rode slowly away, heedless that, looking ten years older, Sir Philip Vining was watching him from the study window.

CHAPTER III.

REVERSED PROCEEDINGS.

SOME people might have called Charley Vining a spoiled child, who had had everything he wished for from his earliest days, and now, at the first disappointment in life, was turning pettish and angry. True enough so far, his every whim had been gratified, and perhaps this made him feel the more bitterly that this newly-awakened desire should be thwarted on every side.

Try what he would, all seemed against him—father, friends, even the object of his choice herself; and he needed no one to tell him that the greatest care was taken to prevent all interviews. That Laura had a great deal to do with it he was sure, with-



out Nelly's confirmatory words. Max too might have some influence; but it was in vain that he thought—matters would only look more and more rugged on ahead; and at length, longing, in spite of his dislike to the meeting, for the evening to come, he cantered away.

‘I only wish I were clever,’ he muttered. ‘Some men would scheme a score of plans; but as for me, I understand horses and dogs, and that is about—’

Charley's thoughts were directed the next moment into another channel; for turning a corner sharply, he came upon a family party from the Elms, consisting of Laura Bray and her two youngest sisters, with Max angrily stamping, clenched of fist and with his face distorted with rage.

‘It's all a confounded plot of yours, Laury—it is, bai Jove!’ he screamed in an

excited voice, the very counterpart of his mother's.

'Indeed, indeed, Max, you wrong me,' she cried. 'It was not — Hush! here's Charley Vining.'

'How do, Miss Bray?' he said, reining in, and trying to be cordial.—'Ah, Max, I thought you were in town.—Well, little ones, how are you off for fruit?'

'Nelly's going to have lots to-night,' said Do, the youngest 'child;' and the blood flushed up in Charley's face as he thought of the note he had received,—for he was as transparent as a girl.

'Bai Jove! ya-a-s,' said Max. 'Been in town, but thought I'd run down again for a bit.'

'What for?' said Charley Vining's jealous heart, as he recalled the excited way in which Max had been gesticulating before his sister.

Max looked half disposed to be sulky; but he caught a meaning glance from Laura, when, feeling that he could not afford to fall off from his part of the compact he had made with her, he commenced talking to his youngest sister, just as Charley's eyes flashed, his nostrils distended, and, evidently moved by some strong emotion, he leaped from his horse, gazing eagerly the while at Max's watch-chain, and then at Max himself, with a fierce questioning look; which the exquisite responded to with a quiet self-satisfied smirk, ran his fingers along the chain, played with the locket and other ornaments to it attached, and then, with a side glance of insolent triumph, he thrust the little finger of his kid glove into a ring which hung there, turned it about a few times, and then walked on with the girls.

Charley Vining's heart felt as if something were making it contract, as if he were

seized by some fearful spasm; for that ring—he would swear it—that ring had once encircled Ella Bedford's finger, and had lain in his palm. He had noticed it particularly, as he had longed to press his lips to the hand it graced—no, that graced the little bauble. What did it mean, then?—what was Nelly's news that she had to communicate? He could have groaned aloud as his heart whispered that he was—not supplanted—but that that empty-headed conceited dandy had been able to carry off the prize he had so earnestly sought—that heartless boasting fop, who esteemed a woman's purest best feelings as deeply as he did the quality of his last box of cigars. It was plain enough the ring was a gift, and had been replaced by another.

‘I *am* a fool—a romantic boy!’ thought Charley to himself; ‘and there is no such thing as genuine passion and feeling in this

world; at least, I am not discriminating enough to know it. Here have I been grasping at the shadow when I could have possessed the substance. But, O!' he mentally groaned, 'how sweet was that shadow, and how bitter is the substance!'

'Have I offended you, Charley?' said a deep soft voice at his ear—a voice trembling with emotion; and starting back to the present, the muser saw that Max had walked on some yards in advance with the girls, and that, with his horse's bridle over his arm, he was standing by Laura, whose hand was half raised, as if ready to be laid upon his arm, while her great dark eyes, swimming with tenderness, were gazing appealingly in his.

There was something new in Laura's manner, something he had not seen before. She was quiet, subdued, and timid; there was a tremulousness in her voice; and with

the feelings that agitated him then swaying him from side to side, it was with a strange sense of trouble that he turned to her, half flinching as he did so.

‘Have I hurt your feelings in some way?’ she said, for he did not reply, and her voice was lower and deeper. ‘You seem so changed, so different, and it grieves me more than you can think.’

It was very dangerous. There had been a sudden discovery coming directly upon Nelly’s announcement that she had something grievous to impart. He had evidently been looked upon as a rude uncultivated boor, and this London exquisite had been preferred before him. In his poor country ignorance, he had been looking upon Ella Bedford’s words as the utterances of a saint, gazing at her every act through a *couleur de rose* medium, till now, when he was rudely awakened from

his simple love-dream ; while, as if offering balm for the wound, here was a passionate loving woman talking, nay, breathing to him in whispers her tender reproaches for what she evidently looked upon as his neglect.

What could he do? He felt that his faith to one he loved would be firm as a rock ; but he owed no allegiance—he had been played with—and this woman to whom he had breathed his love had preferred gloss and polish to his simple homely ways.

It was thus that Charley Vining reasoned with himself, as slightly raising his arm he, as it were, made the first step towards a future of trouble ; for the next instant Laura's hand was laid gently upon that arm, and they were sauntering slowly along. She, trembling and excited ; he, swayed by varied emotions—disappoint-

ment, rage, bitterness, and added to all, the knowledge that he had left that gentle loving old man heartbroken at his persistence in what he now owned to himself had been a wild insane passion.

‘You do not speak—you say nothing to me,’ said Laura softly, as she turned slightly, so as to look in his face. ‘I must in some way have unwittingly caused you annoyance. But there, Charley, I will not dissemble; I know why you are angry, and I must speak. You will think lightly of me—you will even sneer,’ she said, and he could see that the tears were running down her cheeks, and that her breast heaved painfully; ‘but I cannot help it; I must speak now that for once there is an opportunity. You are vexed with me because I was so madly angry with you for flirting. But you would not be, Charley, if you knew all. I don’t think you would willingly hurt any

one; but thoughtless acts sometimes give great pain.'

Charley did not reply, but his arm trembled as they walked on, Laura's passionate words being very truthful, as by a bold stroke she tried to recover the ground she told herself that she had lost.

'See how humble I am. I never, that I can remember, asked pardon before of any one, but I do of you; and I feel humbled and abased as I think, for I know it is enough to make you mock at me. But though you refuse to know my heart, I know yours well, and that it is too much that of a gentleman for you ever to make me repent of what I say.'

Still Charley was silent, though Laura paused to hear him speak. This interview had been unexpected, and had come upon her by surprise; but, led away by her feelings, words in torrents were pressing upon

one another ready to pour forth, and she had to struggle hard to keep those words within due bounds, lest in her agitation she should make a broader avowal than that already uttered, and cause him to turn from her in disgust.

‘Have I so deeply offended you? Can you not pardon me? Is mine such a sin against you, Charley, that I am always to suffer—suffer more deeply than you can believe?’

‘I am not offended,’ he said gently. ‘Indeed, you mistake me.’

‘Charley!’ she exclaimed in a burst of passionate emotion; for the soft, gently-spoken words seemed to sweep away the barrier that she should have more sternly supported—‘I cannot help it; I am half heart-broken. You have been cruel to me; you have maddened me into saying things, and treating you in my rage in a way that

has torn my own breast. But you will forgive me—you will be to me as you were a few months back—and, above all, promise me this, that you will not think lightly of me for this. Indeed, indeed, I cannot, cannot help it; I—I—'

Laura's voice was choked by her passionate sobs; and trembling himself with emotion, mingled of sorrow, pity, and an undefined sense of tenderness evoked by what he had heard, Charley Vining was moved to say a few words perhaps more warmly than under other circumstances he might have done. He did not love Laura Bray—he almost disliked her; but if there was any vanity in his composition, it was sure to be stirred now, when a young and ardent woman was, in the most unmistakable terms, telling him of her love, and imploring his forgiveness for her past resentment.

Charley Vining was but human. His heart had been deeply torn; and in spite of himself his voice softened, and he was about to say words that might have been too sympathising in their nature, when Laura's eyes flashed with bitterness and mortification. Had she possessed the power, she would have turned her to stone where she stood; for, with a laugh half merry, half sad, Nelly came running up, and pressing herself between him and the horse, she caught hold of Charley's other arm.

Charley gave a sigh of relief, as rousing himself, he exclaimed,

‘Ah, Nelly!’

‘I didn't mean to go for a walk,’ said Nelly; ‘but thought I'd come and meet them; and I can't walk with Milly and Do, because of old Max; so I've come here.’

They say that two are company, three none: and if ever those words were true,

they were so here. But, in spite of her mortification, and the agitation brought on by her imprudent avowal, Laura's heart bounded; for she read, or thought she read, on parting, what she called her pardon in Charley Vining's eyes.

CHAPTER IV.

THE 'CANDLESTINE' INTERVIEW.

SIR PHILIP VINING ate his dinner alone that day, for his son was an absentee. In fact, a good half hour before the appointed time Charley Vining was in Gorse Wood walking up and down, crushing the thin grass and trampling through the undergrowth, as he vainly sought to control the impatience of his spirit.

But he was in no controllable humour, and the more he tried to beat down the feelings that troubled him, the more fretful his spirit grew. It had been a day of misery and disappointment, such as he had never thought to see, and he was bitterly mortified with his own conduct. He told

himself that it was his duty to have sternly answered Laura Bray, whereas he had allowed her to go on till, as they parted, her look of intelligence seemed to intimate that she was happy and satisfied, and that he had been making love to her, when—

When? Why should he trouble himself about a light frivolous girl, who gave love tokens to a tailor's dummy—a contemptible jackanapes? But all the same, there was no reason why he should marry Laura Bray, and give up his happy independent life.

'A fig for all womankind!' said Charley at last, out loud; 'but then the poor old gentleman!'

Charley's face darkened as he thought of his father and his wishes. What should he do? Let matters run their course?

He asked himself that last question rather grimly, as he thought of how easily he could be in accord with all Sir Philip

wished. A few quiet tender words to Laura Bray, and all would go on satisfactorily. And why should he not utter them? She would be well content, and he need trouble himself no farther, but seek in his old amusements *délassement* and balm for the disappointment he had met with.

How plain it all was! Max had come down again on Ella's account. Why, he had not spent so much time down at Lexville since he was a boy! Of course, the Brays would not sanction it; but, anyhow, it was another of Mr. Maximilian Bray's conquests.

'Ah, well,' said Charley, as he stood leaning against an oak, 'it's the old story: one's boy love never does come to anything! —What, my little wood-nymph!'

'O, Charley, Charley, Charley!' cried Nelly, running up to him panting, 'what shall I do? I am *so, so* miserable; and

they think I'm in the schoolroom now; and I can't bear it, and I hate it; and I've run out through the side gate and over the elm meadow like a mad girl, for they all watch me; and I stay in my bedroom most of the time; for since Miss Bedford's gone—'

'What?' roared Charley, seizing Nelly's arm.

'Don't frighten me, Charley, and please don't pinch so! That's what I wanted to tell you. That Laura led her such a cruel life with her temper, and Max was such a horrible donkey, that she told ma she would rather not stay, and—O, O, O!' sobbed Nelly, crying out aloud, 'she's gone away, and I didn't say good-bye; for she went early in the morning, and came and kissed me when I was asleep; and me such a thick-headed, stupid old dormouse that I never knew—knew it—or—or I'd have put my

arms so tightly round her neck that I'd never have left go.'

'But where has she gone?' cried Charley fiercely.

'I don't know,' sobbed Nelly—'nobody knows. She would not say a word even to mamma; and mamma said it was very obstinate, and that she was obstinate altogether.'

'Do you think—' said Charley huskily, and then he stopped as if he could not utter the words—'do you think she told Max?'

'Told Max!' said Nelly, almost laughingly; 'no, she wouldn't tell him. She hated him too much, for he was always worrying her, when all the time she was ever so fond of you, Charley. I knew it, though she never said so. Pah, she would never tell such a donkey as that, when she would not tell me! They think I'm very stupid; but I know well enough why she

wouldn't stay, nor yet say where she was going: it was all because of Max, so that he should not bother her any more.'

'Go on, pray!' exclaimed Charley.

'I have not got anything more to tell you,' said Nelly pitifully, 'only that there was such a scene over and over again; for at the last Laury and Max both wanted her to stay, and Laury asked her over and over again; but I could see through that: it was because Max made her, for some reason of his own.'

Here was a new light altogether: Laura and Max both asking her to stay, and the poor girl led such a life that she was compelled to leave. Why had she not confided in him, then, when he had implored her to listen to him? But that ring?

Troubled in spirit, Charley began to stride up and down the wood, but only to stop once more in front of Nelly.

‘When did she go?’ he asked.

‘Yesterday morning,’ said Nelly; ‘but I couldn’t send you word till to-day. And now I want to ask you something, Charley.’

‘Quick, then!’ he said hoarsely, as he turned to go.

‘Will you try and find out where Miss Bedford is gone, and then tell me when you know?’

‘Yes, yes!’ cried Charley, rushing off.

‘Yes, yes, indeed!’ cried Nelly; ‘that’s a pretty way to leave a lady who has given him a mysterious assignation in a wood; and— There, now—what shall I do? If I haven’t forgotten all about the pears!’

CHAPTER V.

MR. MAXIMILIAN BEGINNETH TO SHOW HIS
HAND.

GONE without leaving a trace behind! Would she take another engagement, and write to Mrs. Bray for a recommendation? She might, or she might not. She had taken the train at Lexville station after Dudgeon had, by Mrs. Bray's gracious permission, driven the light cart in with 'the governess's boxes;' but upon Mr. Dudgeon being favoured with five shillings by Charley Vining, he shook his head.

'Sutternly, sir, I did see her boxes in the station, but I didn't read the directions.'

Foiled there, Charley inquired of the booking-clerk.

‘O yes, sir; remember it perfectly well. Mr. Max Bray asked the very same question only this morning. She took a ticket for London, sir.’

‘Max Bray asking,’ mused Charley. ‘Then he did not know where she was, and there could be no undercurrent at work there. Max wanted to know her address, confound him! He had better mind how he stood in his way.’

But, save when his thoughts turned in the direction of Laura Bray, which complication in his affairs troubled him, Charley Vining felt lighter of heart; for though Max held that ring, and so ostentatiously displayed it, there was no reason why he might not have obtained it by some hazard, as he himself had once gained possession of a plain golden cross. Matters were not so desperate after all, and he need not give up hope. And yet what misery for her to

leave Lexville like that, without one word of farewell—flying, as it were, from his persecution, as well as from that of Max Bray!

Thinking over the words, too, of Nelly, how he could imagine the wretched life the poor girl must have led! and then, with brightened eye, he determined to find out where she had taken refuge. But London—the place of all others where a quest seemed vain.

Charley's musings were interrupted by one of the servants handing him a letter.

'John Dudgeon, Mr. Bray's man, sir, gave it to our Thomas this morning.'

Charley hastily tore open the thimble-sealed epistle, to find it written on a very dirty sheet of paper, and in a character that was almost undecipherable; but fortunately the note was not long, and he read as follows:

‘HON’D SUR,— This comes hoppin to fine you verry wel, as it leves me at pre-sen. Mr. Maxy Million comes a hordrin an a swerin at a pore suvvant lik ennythink, an thare aint know pleeing im. An that ante the wa 2 get ennythink out of him as nose. E say wairs Mis Bedfors bocksis directy 2, an off korse I wasn goin 2 tel he; but mi gal jain, she se an rede em bofe, an I lik doin gents a good turn as has sivil tungs for a por suvvant, and shes gon to missus Brandins Kops all laintun; an if Mr. Macks Million wan 2 no, dont let im kum to ure umbel suvvant to kommarn,

‘JHON DUGGIN.

‘P.S. Wich you wone sa i tole u, ples, or yung marsta wil get me the sak.’

Mrs. Brandon’s, Copse Hall, Laneton!
Why, across country that was, not above a dozen miles off, on a branch of the South

Midland Railway. Nothing could have happened more fortunately. He would have the dogcart and drive over at once—no, not at once: he would go the next day; and, come what might, he would see her again. Surely she would not be so hard, so cruel, with him—

His musings were brought to an end by the entrance of Sir Philip with a note in his hand.

The old gentleman looked pale and troubled, but his words were gentle, as he said:

‘A note from Mr. Bray, Charley: he asks us to dinner there to-morrow. Shall I say that we will go?’

‘To the Elms?—to-morrow?’ said Charley. ‘No, I cannot; I have an engagement.’

‘An engagement!—to-morrow, Charley!’ said Sir Philip sadly.

‘Yes, I am going out—I cannot go,’ said Charley hastily.

Sir Philip said no more, but he sighed deeply as he turned and left the room to decline the invitation, thinking bitterly the while of her who had robbed him of his son's confidence and affection; for hitherto father and son had lived almost for one another, and now there was coldness and estrangement.

Laura Bray's eyes sparkled as she saw the servant returning on horseback with the reply from Blandfield Court, for there was a strange excitement now pervading her. In obedience to her brother's wish she had consented to try and prevail upon Ella Bedford to stay; but it was a source of infinite pleasure to her when she had written to tell Max, in London, that, in spite of all persuasion, Miss Bedford had insisted upon leaving, and had gone—bearing his reproaches and anger with the greatest of

patience, when he came down by the fast train, and abused her, and charged her with counterplotting, in the midst of which scene he was interrupted, as we know, by the coming of Charley Vining. As for the events of the next quarter of an hour, they were burned in Laura's memory; and, her rival gone, her heart was light, and she had sat longing for the time when she should next see him who so engrossed her thoughts.

It was at her instigation that a dinner-party had been arranged at the shortest of short notices, ostensibly so that Maximilian Bray might have Charley Vining to see him—a pleasant fiction, which formed the text for much good-humoured banter at the Bray table, while Laura blushed and looked conscious.

The man was a terrible while before he took in that letter, and Laura's colour

came and went a score of times. Then it seemed as if the footman would never bring the letter up. But at last it was handed to Mr. Bray, who was so long getting out his glasses, that Laura, unable to contain herself, exclaimed:

‘Let me look for you, papa.’

Seizing the letter, she tore it open, read a few lines, and then dropped it with a look of the utmost disappointment. Then she walked to the window; but only to hurry the next moment from the room, so as to conceal her tears.

Max joined her, though, ten minutes after. ‘I thought you two had made it up?’ he said inquiringly.

‘Yes—no—I don’t know,’ she answered passionately.

‘He’s going out to-morrow, is he?’ continued Max musingly. ‘What’s he going to do?—where’s he going?’

‘Have you found out what you want?’ said Laura, to turn the current of the conversation.

‘Not yet,’ he said. ‘You ought never to have given me the trouble. But I am at work, and so is he.’

‘What!’ cried Laura eagerly, as she caught her brother’s hand.

‘He’s at work too,’ said Max. ‘Bai Jove! he thinks himself very cunning, but he won’t get over me.’

‘But you do not mean to say that he is trying to get that creature’s address?’ cried Laura pitifully.

‘Raving mad after it, bai Jove!’ said Max. ‘You see you want me, Laury. I must take her out of your way altogether, or it’s no good. He won’t throw her up till he hears something.’

‘Hears something?’ said Laura slowly.

‘Yes,’ said Max in a whisper; ‘hears

something. I had nearly ripened my plans, only this evasion of hers disturbs them, and now I have to begin all over again.'

'But are you sure he has been trying to find out where she is gone?'

'Certain of it; yes, bai Jove, I am!'

'How cruel!—how treacherous!' muttered Laura.

'There, don't go into the high flights, and spoon!' said Max roughly. 'Set your wits to work. And look here, Laury, take my advice. Now, then, are you listening?'

'Yes—yes!' cried Laura, for she had been pressing her hands abstractedly together.

'Then look here. Don't show that you either hear or see anything. I have him on the hip in a way he little thinks for. What you have to do is to meet him always with the same gentle unvarying kindness.

Wink at everything you hear about him; and even if he comes to you straight from her, you must receive him with open arms. Do you hear me?’

‘Yes,’ said Laura bitterly; ‘I hear.’

‘For, bai Jove! he’s not the man to be played with! Any show of jealousy, or whim, or snubbing, or any of that confounded tabbyfoolery you women are so well up in, will drive him away.’

Laura sighed.

‘There, don’t be a fool, Laury! Bai Jove, I’m ashamed of you! I thought you were a woman of more spirit. But look here: I was put out—I was, bai Jove!—when I came down and found the little dove had spread her soft little wings and flown away, for it put me to a great deal of trouble and inconvenience and expense; but you trust to me, and you shall be Lady Vining—of course, I mean when the old

gentleman drops off. But Charley will come back to you like a great sheep as he is.'

'How dare you, Max!' cried Laura, firing up.

'O, there, I don't want to upset the fair sister's sweet prejudices,' said Max, with a sneer. 'There, we'll call him the noble baronet-apparent. He'll come back to you by and by to soothe the pains in his great soft heart, and you shall heal them for him.'

Laura bit her pocket-handkerchief fiercely, and kept tearing it again from between her teeth.

'I have him, I tell you; and, bai Jove! the day shall come when he shall frown at the very mention of the little soft dove's name!'

'But when—when?' cried Laura.

'When!' said Max coolly; 'bai Jove!'

how can I tell? I shall work hard as soon as I have found out the address, and when the proper time comes, my charming sister, I shall want your help in a scene I have *in petto*. It may be a month, or it may be two, or perhaps three; but,' he said excitedly, as he again threw off the drawl, and effeminate way, to let flash out the evil passions of his heart, 'I am in earnest, Laury, and I'll have that address before many days are gone by.'

'But how—how will you get it?' cried Laura.

'Well,' said Max, sinking back into his old way, 'I've got a plan for that too—one that will give but little trouble, and so I don't mind telling you.'

'Well—quick, tell me!' cried Laura.

'Bai Jove! how excited you are!' said Max, laughing insolently, and taking evident delight in probing his sister's wounds.

‘Charley is hard at work trying to find out her address.’

‘Yes, yes!’ cried Laura, pressing her hand to her side.

‘And he’ll be sure to find it sooner or later.’

‘Yes, yes!’ cried Laura pitifully, her eyes flashing with jealous hate the while she stood before her brother, the style of woman who, had she lived at an earlier period, would have gladly taken a leaf from the book of Lucrezia Borgia, and ridded herself of her rival.

‘Well,’ said Max coolly, ‘I said he’d be sure to find it out, didn’t I?’

‘Max—Max! why do you torture me?’ cried Laura. ‘Tell me how you will manage, when you say that you will leave him to find out what should be yours to do, if there is to be any faith in your promise!’

‘Faith!—yes, bai Jove, you may have

faith in me! And there, I won't hurt your feelings any more. Charley will find out the address, and so shall I.'

'But how?' cried Laura passionately, stamping her foot.

'How? Why, bai Jove, *I shall watch him!*'

CHAPTER VI.

THE NEW HOME.

JOHN DUDGEON was right. Ella Bedford's luggage was directed to Mrs. Brandon's, Copse Hall, Laneton, to reach which, unless a fly had been engaged to convey her across country, Ella had to go up to town by one line, and then take her ticket by another. This she did, and reached Copse Hall, a gloomy-looking dwelling, late one evening, her heart sinking as the station fly conveyed her down a muddy lane, on the Crop-pley Magna road. The hedges were heavy, and the trees seemed all weeping — drip, drip, drip — while an occasional gust of wind drove the rain against the fly window.

Cold, sombre-looking, and bare was the

house; and feeling that the refuge she had sought by means of advertising would be to her as a prison, Ella descended from the fly. A tall hard-looking footman opened the door, and kept her standing on the mat of a great bare hall, whose floor was polished oak, and whose ornaments were a set of harsh stiff-backed chairs, that looked as if they had been made out of old coffin boards, while the cold wind rushed through and shut a door somewhere in the back regions with an echoing bang.

‘There’ll be a row about that,’ said the hard-faced footman, as he set down the second trunk and closed the door, and the flyman drove off. ‘Missus hates the doors to bang, and they will do it when the wind’s in the south. You’re to come in here, please, Miss—Bedford, isn’t it?’

Trembling, in spite of her efforts to be calm, Ella responded to his query, and then

followed the footman to a great gaunt-looking door. He opened it, and announced, 'Miss Bedford.' She advanced a few steps, seeing nothing for the blinding tears that would stand in her eyes—tears that she had much difficulty to keep from falling. Then the door was closed behind her, and she felt two warm soft hands take hers, and that she was drawn towards a great glowing fire.

'Why, my dear child!' said a pleasant voice, 'you are chilled through. Come this way.'

Then, as in a dream, she felt herself placed in a soft yielding easy-chair, her bonnet and mantle removed, the same soft hands smoothing back her hair, and then, as a pair of warm lips were pressed to hers, the same voice said gently:

'Welcome to Copse Hall, my love! I hope it will prove to you a happy home.'

Ella started to her feet as those words thrilled through her ; words so new, so tender, so motherly, that she could no longer restrain her feelings, but threw herself, sobbing violently, upon the gentle breast that seemed to welcome her ; for two arms pressed her tightly there for a few moments. Then there were soothing whispers, soft hands caressing her ; and at last Ella was seated calm and tranquil at Mrs. Brandon's feet, feeling that, after the storms of the past, a haven of safety had been reached ; and long was the converse which followed, as ingenuously Ella told all to her new friend, whose hand still rested on, or played with, the soft glossy bands of hair.

‘We will not make a host of promises,’ said Mrs. Brandon cheerfully ; ‘but see how we get on. You were quite right to leave there : and I had such a kind letter

from the Reverend Henry Morton, that I was glad to secure your aid for my children's education.'

'Mr. Morton was very, very kind,' said Ella, 'and offered me a home when poor mamma died; but I thought that I ought to be up and doing, though I did not expect so much trouble at the outset.'

'Trouble, my child,' said Mrs. Brandon softly,—'the world is full of it;' and Ella, looking up, glanced at the widow's weeds. 'Yes, seven years ago now,' she continued, interpreting Ella's glance. 'But the troubles here could be lessened, if we studied others more and self less. But there, bless me, you haven't seen the children!' and jumping up, she rang, and the hard-faced footman appeared.

'Tell Jane to bring in the young ladies, Edward,' said Mrs. Brandon; and, five minutes after, two bright happy-looking

girls of eight and ten came running in. 'There, my dears, that is Miss Bedford—your new governess.'

The two girls went smiling up to offer their hands and kiss her, the younger clinging to her, and reading her face with a curious childish gaze.

'They are both totally spoiled, Miss Bedford,' said Mrs. Brandon, gazing fondly at her children; 'and they're behindhand and tomboyish, and will give you no end of trouble. But you must rule them very strictly; and as they've not been quite so bad to-day, they may have tea with us this evening.'

The girls clapped their hands, and over that pleasant meal it seemed to Ella that she must have been there for months; while, when Mrs. Brandon accompanied her to her bedroom that night—a snug pleasant chamber, with a fire, books, and a

general aspect of comfort—and left her alone with the sense of the warm kiss on her lips—a friendly pressure on her hand, Ella sank upon her knees, and the tears would for a while flow—tears this time, though, of thankfulness for the refuge she had found.

Two days of happiness had passed like a dream, in spite of sad thoughts and an undefined dread that all was too bright to last, when, seated in the drawing-room with Mrs. Brandon, Ella's heart leaped, and then the blood seemed to rush to her heart, for the clangour of the hall bell proclaimed a visitor. The next minute the hard footman entered with a card upon a salver.

'Gentleman wishes to see Miss Bedford,' he said; and Ella with trembling hand took the card, to read thereon:

*'Mr. Charles Vining,
Blandfield Court.'*

CHAPTER VII.

MRS. BRANDON'S RECEPTIONS.

Mrs. BRANDON made no movement as the card was handed to Ella; but a look of firmness seemed imperceptibly to sweep across her pleasant matronly face, and one skilled in physiognomy would have said that she was waiting anxiously to see how the young girl would act, under what threatened to be very trying circumstances. Then, glancing at Ella, she saw her standing, pale as ashes, with the card in her hand.

‘Where have you shown the gentleman, Edward?’ said Mrs. Brandon.

‘Breakfast-room, ma’am,’ said the hard footman.

‘Very good; you need not wait,’ said

Mrs. Brandon; and the next moment they were alone, when, with pleading eyes, Ella held out the card.

‘Indeed, indeed, ma’am, I could not help this,’ she whispered. ‘I hoped that my retreat would not have been known.’

‘My dear child,’ said Mrs. Brandon kindly, ‘I do not blame you;’ and she also rose and passed her arm round Ella’s waist. ‘But you would like to see him?’

‘No, no, *no*!’ cried Ella hastily. ‘I must not—I would rather not—it cannot be! I hoped to have been left here in peace, and free from persecution. I cannot see him; I must never see him again.’

‘You wish, then, that Mr. Charles Vining should be told that you decline to see him, and you beg he will not call again?’ said Mrs. Brandon softly, as she drew the fair girl nearer to her.

‘I would not willingly hurt him,’ said

Ella hoarsely; 'but I have told you all, and what else can I do? It can never be!'

'My child,' said Mrs. Brandon tenderly, 'I don't know how it is, but you seem to have even in this short time made yourself occupy the place of a daughter. You are quite right, and this gay gallant must be checked and kept in his place. We cannot have hawks here to flutter our dovecot. I will go and see him—that is, if it is indeed your honest wish and desire that he should see you no more.'

'Yes, yes, it is indeed!' said Ella, with a sob that tore its way from her breast. 'I can never see him more.'

Mrs. Brandon made a movement to leave the room, but Ella clung to her.

'Do you repent of what you have said?' Mrs. Brandon quietly asked.

'No, no!' said Ella half hysterically: 'but—it is very kind of you to see him—'

but—but you will speak gently to him—you will not be harsh or cruel; for he is good and noble, and true-hearted and manly, and I believe he feels all this deeply.'

Mrs. Brandon smiled incredulously, but there was pity in her words as she bent over Ella, and tried to calm her.

'Is it really then like that, my poor, weak, gentle little dove?' she whispered. 'Has he then made so firm a footing in this poor soft yielding heart? But you are quite right; you must not see him, and the soreness will soon wear off. You do not know the ways of the world, and of these gay, insidious, smooth-tongued gallants, born with the idea that every pretty face beneath them in station, forsooth, is to minister to their pleasure. I see—I see; and I don't blame you for believing all he said.'

'But I think you mistake his character,' said Ella pleadingly.

‘Perhaps so,’ said Mrs. Brandon, smiling; ‘but will you leave your welfare in my hands, Ella?’

It was the first time Mrs. Brandon had called her by her Christian name, and the young girl looked up with a sad sweet smile.

‘I am very young, very helpless, and quite alone in the world,’ she said softly; ‘and I have met here with kindness such as I have not before known since *they* died. I was so happy, so hopeful, so trustful that happier days were coming; and, indeed. I wish to be grateful.’

Mrs. Brandon kissed her again, and made a movement once more to leave; but Ella made a clutch at her hand.

‘Shall I stay?’ said Mrs. Brandon softly. ‘Will you see him yourself?’

Ella was silent for a moment, for there was a great, a wild struggle in her breast;

but she conquered, and drawing herself up, she stood, pale and cast down of eye, with one hand resting on a chair-back.

‘Do I understand you, Miss Bedford?’ said Mrs. Brandon.

‘Yes, yes!’ said Ella, in a calm sad voice. ‘I must never see him again.’

Mrs. Brandon moved towards the door, and laid her hand upon the lock, making it rattle loudly as she turned to gaze at Ella; but the latter never moved; and as the door closed, Mrs. Brandon’s last glance showed her Ella pale and motionless as a statue.

‘Now for this lordly gallant!’ muttered Mrs. Brandon, as she stood for a moment in the gaunt hall; ‘now for this sportive disturber of young hearts! If I had my will,’ she exclaimed, her handsome matronly features flushing up, ‘I’d have them all banished—I would!’

Then, with a firm step, and her head

drawn back, she crossed the hall, threw open the door, and entered the room where Charley Vining was impatiently walking up and down.

CHAPTER VIII.

MRS. BRANDON'S RECEPTIONS: FIRST VISITOR.

CHARLEY VINING started as, instead of Ella Bedford, he was confronted by a tall, handsome, middle-aged lady, who bowed stiffly, and motioned him to a seat, taking one herself at the same time.

‘I have the pleasure of addressing—?’ said Charley inquiringly.

‘Mrs. Brandon,’ was the reply.

‘And Miss Bedford is not ill, I trust?’ said Charley anxiously.

‘Miss Bedford has requested me, as her particular friend, to meet you, and answer any questions upon her behalf.’

‘But she will see me, will she not?’ said Charley earnestly. ‘Her leaving us was so

sudden—I was taken so by surprise. You say, madam, that you are her friend?

Mrs. Brandon bowed, and Charley wiped the dew from his forehead.

‘May I then plead for one interview, however short?’

Mrs. Brandon frowned, and then rising, she stood with one hand resting upon the table.

‘Young man,’ she said firmly — and Charley started as she looked down almost fiercely upon him, ‘you are the son of Sir Philip Vining, I believe?’

‘I am,’ said Charley, slightly surprised.

‘A worthy old country squire, whose name is known for miles round in connection with kindly deeds.’

‘My father,’ said Charley proudly, ‘is, in every sense of the word, a gentleman.’

‘Then why is not his son?’ said Mrs. Brandon fiercely.

‘Me? Why am not I?’ said Charley, in a puzzled voice.

‘Yes, sir, you!’ exclaimed Mrs. Brandon angrily. ‘Why should not the only son be as the father?’

‘Because,’ said Charley proudly, once more, ‘it does not befall that there should be two such men for many generations.’

‘It seems so,’ said Mrs. Brandon bitterly; ‘but the son might learn something from the father’s acts.’

‘Good heavens, madam! what does this mean? What have I done that you should speak to me thus?’ cried Charley earnestly.

‘What have you done!’ exclaimed Mrs. Brandon, standing before him with flashing eyes. ‘You pitiful coward! you base scoundrel! how dare you come before me with your insidious, plausible, professing ways—before me, a mother—the wife of an English gentleman, who would have had

you turned out of the house! Silence, sir!’ she exclaimed, as Charley rose, now pale, now flushed, and looked her in the face. ‘You shall hear me out before you quit this room. I say, how dare you come before me here, and parade your interest, and the trouble you are in because *she* has left the Elms? Do you think I do not know the ways of the world—of the modern English gentleman? You pitiful libertine! If I were a man, my indignation is so hot against you, that I should even so far forget myself as to strike you. Could you find no pleasanter pastime than to insinuate your bold handsome face into the thoughts of that sweet simple-minded country girl—a poor clergyman’s daughter—a pure-hearted lady—to be to her as a blight—to be her curse—to win a heart of so faithful and true a nature, that once it has beaten to the command of love, it would never beat

for another? I can find no words for the scorn, the utter contempt, with which you inspire me. But there, I will say no more, lest I forget myself in my hot passion; but I tell you this, she has been here but a few hours, and yet, few as they are, they have been long enough to show me that she is a pearl beyond price — a gem that your libertine fingers would sully. She has won from me a mother's love, I may say; and wisely trusting to me, she bids me tell you that she will see you no more!

‘She bade you tell me this?’ said Charley hoarsely; ‘and have you poisoned her ears against me thus?’

‘Poisoned her ears!’ exclaimed Mrs. Brandon, forgetting her *rôle* in her excitement, ‘poor, innocent, weak child! She believes you to be perfection, and but a few minutes since was imploring me to be

gentle with the gay Lothario who has so basely deluded her, though she had the good sense and wisdom to seek another home. What—what!’ cried Mrs. Brandon, ‘are you so hardened that you dare smile to my face with your nefarious triumph?’

‘Smile!’ said Charley slowly, and in a strange dreamy way; ‘it must be then the reflection of the heart that laughs within me for joy at those last words of yours. Mrs. Brandon,’ he exclaimed, firing up, ‘but for the proud knowledge that your accusations are all false, the bitter lashing you have given me would have been maddening. But you wrong me cruelly; I deserve nothing of what you say, unless,’ he said proudly, ‘it is wrong to purely love with my whole heart that sweet gentle girl. Mrs. Brandon, you are a woman—you must once have loved,’ he cried almost implor-

ingly. 'What have I done that I should be treated so? Why should she meet me always with this plea of difference of worldly position? You see I am not angry—you have made my heart warm towards you for the interest you take in her. It may be strange for me to speak thus to you, a stranger, but you broke down the barrier, and even if it be simple, I tell you that I am proud to say that I love her dearly—that I can know no rest till she is mine. Indeed, you wrong me!' he cried, catching her hand in his. 'Intercede for me. This indignation is uncalled for. Yes; look at me—I do not flinch. Indeed my words are honest!'

Mrs. Brandon gazed at him searchingly, but he did not shrink.

'I am no judge of human hearts,' said Charley earnestly, as he continued pleading; 'but my own tells me that one so easily

moved to indignation in a righteous cause must be gentle and generous. You have shown me how you love her, and that, in spite of your cruel words, draws me to you. Think of my pain—think of what I suffer; for indeed,' he said simply, 'I do suffer cruelly! But you will let me see her—you will let me plead my own cause once more, as I try to remove the impression she has that a union would blight my prospects. It is madness! But you will let me see her?'

For the last five minutes Mrs. Brandon had been utterly taken aback. Prejudging Charley from her own experience, she had emptied upon his defenceless head the vials of her wrath, while ever since the first burst of indignation had been expended, the thought had been forcing itself upon her that she had judged rashly—that she was mistaken. No frivolous pleasure-seek-

ing villain could have spoken in that way—none but the most consummate hypocrite could have uttered those simple sentiments in so masterly a fashion. And surely, her heart said, this could be no hypocrite—no deceiver! If he were, she was one of the deceived; for his upright manly bearing, his gentle appealing way, the true honest look in his eyes, could only have been emanations from a pure heart; and at last, overcome by her emotion, Mrs. Brandon sank back in her seat, as, still grasping her hand tightly, Charley stood over her.

‘Have I, then, wronged you?’ she faltered.

‘As heaven is my judge, you have!’ cried Charley earnestly. ‘I never loved but one woman before.’

‘And who was that?’ said Mrs. Brandon anxiously.

‘My dead mother; and her I love still!’ said Charley earnestly.

‘Mr. Vining,’ said Mrs. Brandon, ‘I beg your pardon!’

‘What for?’ cried Charley; ‘for showing me that Miss Bedford has found a true friend? Heaven bless you!’ he said; and he raised her hand to his lips before turning away and walking to the window.

At the end of a minute he was back at her side.

‘Mrs. Brandon,’ he said, ‘will you also be my friend? Will you act as counsel and judge for us both? I will leave my fate in your hands. Think quietly over it all, talk to Ella, and see what is right. You will not judge me wrongly again,’ he said, smiling.

‘I cannot think calmly now,’ she said; ‘I am agitated and taken aback. I thought

to castigate a libertine, and I have been, I fear, lacerating the heart of a true gentleman! Go now, I beg of you!

‘But you will let me see her once—but for a minute?’ pleaded Charley.

‘No!’ said Mrs. Brandon firmly. ‘It is her wish, *and mine*, that you should not see her now.’

‘Now!’ said Charley, catching at the word. ‘Then I may call again—to-morrow—the next day?’

‘No!’ said Mrs. Brandon thoughtfully; ‘no! be content. I am but a weak woman, and I have shown myself to be no judge of human character. I must have proof, and the words of others; when, if you come scatheless from the ordeal, I will be your friend.’

‘You will!’ cried Charley joyfully, as he caught her hands in his; and then what more he would have said was choked by

his emotion. 'When may I come again?' he said at last.

'To see *me*?' queried Mrs. Brandon smilingly.

'Yes,' replied Charley, with a sigh.

'This day week,' said Mrs. Brandon. And five minutes after Charley's mare was galloping at such a rate that her rider did not see the grinning face of Max Bray peering at him from over a hedge. In fact, Charley saw nothing but his own thoughts till he reached the Court, where he encountered his father on the steps.

'Where have you been?' said the old gentleman sternly, but with a shade of sadness in his voice.

'To Copse Hall, Laneton,' replied Charley boldly.

'Is that where Miss Bedford now resides?' said the old gentleman, watching the play of his son's features.

‘Father,’ said Charley, ‘I never deceived you yet.’

‘No, Charley,’ said Sir Philip with trembling voice. ‘Is it there?’

‘Yes!’ replied the young man; and he turned away.

CHAPTER IX.

MRS. BRANDON'S RECEPTIONS : SECOND VISITOR.

MRS. BRANDON returned to the drawing-room after Charley Vining's departure, to find Ella as she had left her, standing cold and motionless, supporting herself by one hand upon the chair-back, but ready to confront Mrs. Brandon as she entered the room.

'Has he gone?' whispered Ella, with a strange catching of the breath.

'Yes,' said Mrs. Brandon, who watched her keenly; and then, as a half-suppressed sob forced itself from the wounded breast, Ella turned and began to walk slowly from the room.

'My child!' whispered Mrs. Brandon,

hurrying to her side, and once more passing a protecting arm around her.

Ella turned her sad gentle face towards Mrs. Brandon with a smile.

‘Let me go to my own room now,’ she said. ‘You are very good. I am very sorry; but I could not help all this.’

Mrs. Brandon kissed her tenderly, and watched her as she passed through the door, returning herself to sit thoughtfully gazing at the floor, till, taking pen, ink, and paper, she wrote three hurried notes, and addressed them to various friends residing in the neighbourhood of Blandfield Court. One will serve as an example of the character of the others. It was addressed to an old intimate and schoolfellow — Mrs. Lingon; and ran as follows:

‘MY DEAR MRS. LINGON, — Will you kindly, and in strict confidence, give me *your*

opinion respecting the character and pursuits of a neighbour—Mr. Charles Vining. I have a particular reason for wishing to know. With kind love, I am yours sincerely,

EMILY BRANDON.'

The answers came by the mid-day post on the second afternoon, when, Ella being pale and unwell, one of the upper servants had been sent with the children for their afternoon walk.

Mrs. Brandon was evidently expecting news; for, after sitting talking to Ella in a quiet affectionate way for some time, she rang the bell, and the hard footman appeared.

'Has not Thomas returned from Lane-ton with the letter-bag?'

'Just coming up the lane as you rang, ma'am,' said the man, who then hurried out, to return with several letters, three of

which Mrs. Brandon read with the greatest interest and a slight flush of colour in her cheeks, when, with a gratified sigh, she placed them in a desk, and closing her eyes, leaned back quiet and thoughtful, till her musing was interrupted by the reappearance of the footman, with salver and card.

‘Gentleman wishes to see Miss Bedford,’ said the man, handing the card.

‘Not the same gentleman?’ exclaimed Mrs. Brandon excitedly, and as if annoyed at what she looked upon as a breach of faith.

‘No, ’m; ’nother gentleman — a little one,’ said the hard footman.

‘That will do,’ said Mrs. Brandon quietly; and the man left the room, as, with the colour mounting to her cheeks, Ella handed the card just taken.

‘Mr. Maximilian Bray,’ said Mrs. Brandon, glancing at the delicate slip of paste-

board, enamelled and scented. 'That is *the* Mr. Bray you named?'

Ella bowed her head, and then, as if transformed into another, she said hastily,

'Mrs. Brandon, I think you give me credit for trying to avoid this unpleasantry; you know I cannot help these calls. It will be better,' she said huskily, 'that I leave here, and at once.'

'Give you credit? Of course, child!' said Mrs. Brandon quietly. 'Sit down, you foolish girl. So, this is the dandy — the exquisite! I think we can arrange for his visiting here no more. That is,' she said playfully, 'unless *you* wish to see him.'

Ella's eyes quite flashed and her nostrils dilated as she recalled past insults; all of which was duly marked by Mrs. Brandon, who smiled once more as she rose to leave the room.

‘I need not spare his feelings, I presume?’ she said.

‘What excuses can I offer you?—what thanks can I give you?’ cried Ella earnestly.

‘Just as many as I ask you for,’ said Mrs. Brandon, smiling, and then kissing her affectionately. ‘I believe you are a little witch, my child, and that you are charming all our hearts away. Why, the cook has been civil ever since you have been here; and Mary the housemaid has not said a word about giving warning; and as for Edward, he has not let the great passage-door slam once. But, bless me, child!’ she said merrily, as she glanced at the mirror in front, ‘am I in fit trim to present myself before the great Mr. Maximilian Bray?’

But Ella could not smile: her heart beat fast, and she was troubled; and, in spite of Mrs. Brandon’s affectionate behavi-

our, she feared that this persecution might tend to shorten her stay at Copse Hall. A sense of keen sorrow pervaded her at such a prospect—at a time too when it seemed that she had found a haven of peace, where she might bear the sorrows of the past; and as Mrs. Brandon left the room, she sank down in her chair, and covered her face with her hands.

There was a smile upon Mrs. Brandon's countenance as she entered the breakfast-room, to find Max busy before a glass, battling with a recalcitrant stud.

Most men would have been slightly confused on being found in such a position; but not so Max. He turned round slowly, displaying the manifold perfections of his exquisite toilet, smiled, showed his fine white teeth and pearl-gray gloves, and then advanced and placed a chair for Mrs. Brandon, taking the one to which he was waved

by the lady of the house, who was still smiling.

‘Charming weather, is it not?’ said Max in his most fascinating tones, as he caressed one whisker, and placed boot number one a little farther out in front, so that the fit might be observed. ‘Pleasure of addressing Mrs. Brandon, I presume?’

Mrs. Brandon bowed.

‘Ah! ya-as, bai Jove! mutual acquaintance, and all that. Heard the Lingons speak of you, and being riding this wa-a-ay, took the liberty—’

‘Yes!’ said Mrs. Brandon rather sharply.

‘Ya-as, just so, bai Jove!’ said Max obtusely. ‘Took the liberty of giving you a call. Country’s ra-ather dull just now: don’t you find it so?’

‘Not at all,’ said Mrs. Brandon, who was evidently highly amused.

‘Just so! ya-as, bai Jove!—of course!’

said Max. 'Miss Bedford be down soon, I suppose? Hope you like her—most amiable girl.'

'I quite agree with you,' said Mrs. Brandon.

'Ya-as, just so — of course!' drawled Max, who either could not or would not see the half-amused, half-contemptuous way in which his remarks were received. 'Thought I'd call and see her,' he continued. 'We all thought a deal of her; but she would go.'

'Indeed!' said Mrs. Brandon.

'Ya-as,' drawled Max. 'Fancy it was some annoyance she met with from young Vining: not that I wish to say anything—bai Jove, no!'

'I'm sure Miss Bedford will be delighted to hear of the kind interest you take in her,' said Mrs. Brandon.

'O, I don't know so much about that!'

said Max; 'but we were always very good friends.'

'You puppy!' muttered Mrs. Brandon.

'Always liked her because of the interest she took in a sister of mine. Down soon, I suppose?'

'Who—Miss Bedford?' said Mrs. Brandon.

'Ya-as,' drawled Max; 'should like to have a quiet chat with her;' and he directed one of his most taking glances at the lady, who, all smiles and good-humour, had been studying his manners and dress in a way that Max set down for admiration, and presuming thereon, he grew every moment more confidential. 'You see, when she was at home, Mrs. Brandon, I felt a natural diffidence.'

'I beg your pardon,' said Mrs. Brandon.

'Natural diffidence—kind of drawing back, you know,' explained Max. 'Didn't

seem the sort of thing, you see, to be too attentive to the governess; but—er—er—must own to a sort of weakness in that direction. Nature, you see—bai Jove!—and that sort of thing, for she is a dooced attractive girl.'

'Very,' said Mrs. Brandon; and Max went on, for he was in his blind-rut mood—a rut in which he could run on for hours without ever seeing that he was being laughed at.

'Glad you think so—I am, bai Jove! Very kind of you too, to be so cordial and—'

'Pray do not imagine—' began Mrs. Brandon.

'No, no. Don't make any excuses, pray,' said Max, interrupting her. 'You see, I've been candid, and I've no doubt that you'll give me your permission to call frequently.—But is Miss Bedford coming down?'

Mrs. Brandon did not reply; but still smiling pleasantly, she rose, rang the bell, and then resumed her seat.

‘Bai Jove! don’t trouble yourself—I can wait,’ said Max. ‘Ladies’ toilets do take a long while sometimes.’

Mrs. Brandon smiled, and then rose again, as the hard-faced footman opened the door.

‘Edward,’ she said in the coolest and most cutting manner, ‘do you see this gentleman?’

‘Yes, ma’am, I see him,’ said the astonished servant.

‘He has made a mistake in coming here.’

‘Yes, ma’am,’ said the footman.

‘Show him to the door; and if ever he has the impertinence to call here again, either to ask for Miss Bedford or me, order him off the premises; and if he does not immediately go, send for the policeman.’

‘Bai Jove!’ drawled the astonished Max,
‘what does this mean?’

‘You will show him out directly,’ said Mrs. Brandon, who would not turn her face in his direction, but continued to address the man; ‘and give him fully to understand what will be his fate if he should have the insolence to call any more.’

‘Yes, ma’am,’ said Edward, trying to keep back a grin.

‘Bai Jove, she’s mad!’ ejaculated Max.

‘Now then, sir; this way, please,’ said the hard-faced footman, whose countenance, if stony before, was now adamantine.

‘Hyar, I say, you—Mrs. Brandon!’ ejaculated Max, ‘what does this mean?’

‘Air you coming, sir, or airn’t you?’ said the footman angrily. Then, opening the door to its widest extent, he placed a chair against it, and advanced so fiercely towards the unwelcome visitor, that, to give

him his due, more from dread of a disarrangement of his attire than fear of the man, he retreated round the table, stumbling once over a chair as he did so, and then in his confusion halting in the doorway. The next moment he was hurried into the great hall, and backed out by Edward, who, enjoying his task, proved himself to be the most uncompromising of footmen, and slightly exceeded his duty by slamming the hall-door after his discomfited guest with all his might, just as his mistress crossed and entered the drawing-room, where, pale and excited, Ella sat awaiting her.

‘There, my child, that’s over!’ exclaimed Mrs. Brandon; and then, in spite of Ella’s troubled face, she leaned back in her chair, and burst into an uncontrolled fit of laughter, till, seeing how disturbed her companion looked, she sat up once more.

‘I meant to have been angry, and given

him a tremendous snubbing,' she said; 'but, as he says, "bai Jove!" it was impossible. Of all the consummate puppies I ever beheld, I think he is the quintessence. And he is so dense too, he seems to have not the slightest idea when you are laughing at him. There, my dear Ella, never wear that troubled face about the donkey. He is not worthy of a moment's thought; and besides, he will never show his face here again.'

'I cannot help feeling troubled about him,' said Ella slowly, and as if she were telling her thoughts. 'I fear him; and, dear Mrs. Brandon, you do not know his character. It seems to me that that artificial glaze covers much that is gross, and unprincipled, and relentless. It has been my misfortune to have attracted his notice, and I never think of him without a shiver of dread. He seems to have cast a shadow across my path; and a dread of coming evil

in some way connected with him—a strange undefined sense of peril—haunts me again and again.’

‘There, there; what nonsense!’ laughed Mrs. Brandon merrily. ‘We’ll watch over you like dragons, and no one shall molest you; or, if it should come to the worst, we will set one chivalrous knight against the other—in plain English, Mr. Charles Vining shall trounce, or call out and shoot, or do something to Mr. Maximilian, the scented. Bah! he is in my nostrils now! But who is to be the next? Really, I am hard set to keep my little acquisition. How many more visitors of the masculine gender will there be, Miss Bedford?’

Ella looked at her so pitifully, that she directly ceased her light bantering tone, and changed the subject; while, perfectly astounded at the unexpected termination of his reception, Max Bray rode slowly home.

CHAPTER X.

MRS. BRANDON'S RECEPTIONS: THIRD VISITOR.

MRS. BRANDON'S was a genuine feeling of affection for the gentle motherless girl who strove so hard and not unsuccessfully to gain the love of her pupils. She had called herself a poor judge of human nature, and had doubtless erred with regard to Charley Vining; but her estimation of Ella Bedford's worth, quickly as it was arrived at, was correct; and many an hour were her thoughts devoted to the best means of serving her protégée.

It need hardly be stated that Charley Vining too occupied no slight share of her thoughts—thoughts that now inclined in one, now in the other direction. They

loved ; that was evident. Both were young, true-hearted, handsome. They would make an admirable couple. Why should there not be an engagement? Then the balance was on the other side—of difference of position, the slighting treatment that might be met with from wealthy relations ; and all at last ended with a sigh, as she told herself that the only way in which she could act was to be a watchful friend to her protégée, and to let matters shape themselves as they would, hoping always that the course they would take would be the best.

Meanwhile, during one of her walks with the children, Ella had a narrow escape from an encounter with Max Bray ; and after staying within doors for a couple of days, she again had to hurry back ; but this time not without his company for a part of the distance—a fact which Ella was not slow

in announcing to her protectress, who bit her lip with annoyance, and tried to form some plan for putting a stop to these importunities; but, strangely enough, all Mrs. Brandon's plans ended with thoughts of Charley Vining—when she gave up.

The day at last came when, in accordance with the given consent, Charley was to call; and Mrs. Brandon sat turning matters over in her mind as to what she should do—what plan she should adopt. The week had slipped away, and, in spite of her cogitation, she was still undecided. 'What should she do?' she asked herself for the hundredth time. She had not even acquainted Ella with the fact that he was coming again; and in a few hours he would certainly be there, beseeching her to stand his friend.

'What should she do?' she asked herself again; and she was just about to send

to request Ella to come to the drawing-room when a carriage drove up to the door, there was a peal at the bell, and directly after Mrs. Brandon felt that matters had indeed now come to a crisis; for the footman came in and announced Sir Philip Vining.

‘To see Miss Bedford, Edward?’ she asked eagerly.

‘No, ma’am; to see you.’

And this time, with no slight feeling of trepidation, Mrs. Brandon requested that the visitor might be shown in there, and prepared herself for what she conceived would be an anxious scene.

The old baronet bowed with all a courtier’s grace, and then, taking the indicated seat, immediately opened the business upon which he had come.

‘You are doubtless surprised at this call, Mrs. Brandon,’ he said, ‘for we are not

acquaintances, and our homes are far removed ; but I will be frank with you. You have a young lady here as governess—a Miss Bedford ?’

‘ Yes,’ said Mrs. Brandon quietly, as she waited to see what course she ought to pursue.

‘ I come to ask your permission for an interview with that young lady,’ said Sir Philip.

‘ It was unnecessary, Sir Philip Vining,’ said Mrs. Brandon, rising. ‘ I will at once send Miss Bedford to you.’

‘ Stay, stay a little, I beg of you,’ said Sir Philip ; and Mrs. Brandon resumed her seat. ‘ I must tell you, in the first place, that my son—my only son—has formed a most unfortunate attachment in that quarter—an attachment which it seems to me will blight his prospects in life. Mind, madam,’ he added hastily, ‘ I make no attack upon

the lady, who may be one of the most estimable of women ; but it would grieve me sorely if such an alliance were to be formed. It may seem to be weak, but I have a certain pride in our old pedigree, and it is the earnest wish of my heart that my son should marry well.'

He paused for a moment.

'I was aware of this,' said Mrs. Brandon quietly.

'Indeed !' said Sir Philip. 'But I need not be surprised : Miss Bedford has, perhaps, confided to you my son's offer.'

'Yes,' said Mrs. Brandon, 'and so did your son.'

'He was here a week ago,' said Sir Philip. 'Has he been since ?'

'I expect him this afternoon to ask my coöperation ; and I confess I am much troubled thereby.'

'Your coöperation ?' said Sir Philip ;

‘but I see, the lady is perhaps coy. Mrs. Brandon, I must ask your aid on my side. This marriage is impossible—it would be an insane act, and can never take place. Will you ask that Miss Bedford may be sent here?’

‘Will you see her alone?’

‘No, no! I would rather you were present, Mrs. Brandon. You know all; and perhaps, as a mother, you may be able to sympathise with another parent.’

‘Sir Philip Vining, you are placing me in a most difficult position. How am I to divide sympathies that are with all of you? But I will ring. Let us have Ella here; and I tell you candidly that I am glad to be free from a responsibility that threatened to fix itself upon my shoulders.’

‘Ask Miss Bedford to step this way,’ said Mrs. Brandon as the man appeared.

And five minutes after, very pale, but

quite collected, Ella was ushered into the room.

Mrs. Brandon advanced to meet her, and led her to Sir Philip, who saluted her gravely, and then placed for her a chair.

Then for a few minutes there was an embarrassed silence, broken at last by Sir Philip Vining.

‘Miss Bedford,’ he said, ‘I am an old and prejudiced man; proud of my wealth, proud of my estate, proud of my position in the county. I have, too, an only son, whose life and future are dearer to me than my own. For many years past my sole hope has been that he would form some attachment to a lady of his own rank in society; one who should be to him a loving wife—to me a daughter in whom I could feel pride.

‘Hear me out,’ he continued, rising and standing before Ella, in almost a piteous

and pleading attitude, while Mrs. Brandon sank upon her knees by the fair girl's side, and placing one hand around her, took Ella's with the other.

‘Hear me out,’ said Sir Philip; ‘and forgive me if my words sound harsh and cruel. On an unfortunate day he beheld you—fair, beautiful, as was his sainted mother—a woman to be seen but to be loved; and though I came here hot and angered against you, I tell you frankly that I am weak and disarmed. Had it been some proud scheming woman, I could have acted; but I find you sweet, gentle, pure-hearted, and one who gains the good word and love of all with whom you come in contact. He tells me boldly that he loves you. I do not ask you if you love him. No one could know his frank honest heart without giving him their love. But I ask you, hoping that any affection you may bear him

may be slight, to make some sacrifice for his sake—for my sake—the sake of an old man who will give you his blessing. You must esteem him, even if you do not love. Think, then, of his prospects—think of his position. You see I humble myself, for his sake, to plead to you—to implore that this may go no farther. I came as a last hope ; for I find that he has sought you out—that he will be here again to-day.’

‘He here to-day!’ exclaimed Ella, starting, her wounds reopened by the cruel ordeal she was called upon to suffer. Then calmly rising, she stood before the old man, looking down at his feet, as, clearly and distinctly, she said, ‘Sir Philip Vining—his father!—I love him too well—with too pure a love—a love that I dare here avow to you—to wrong him either in thought or deed ! I have told him it is impossible ; I have avoided—I have fled from him. I

have done all that woman can do to prove to him that we are separated by a gulf that cannot be crossed. I came here seeking rest and peace; but it was not to be: and in a few days I will go—go somewhere where he shall see me no more! You need not fear for me. I would not listen to him—I will not listen to him; and I thought that all that was at an end. It is nothing!’ she said with a gasp, turning with a smile to Mrs. Brandon. ‘I think I am weak. I wish to be alone. Sir Philip Vining will excuse me perhaps; but I have had much trouble lately. Thanks; I am better now!’

She tried to withdraw her hand; but Sir Philip took it, and raised it to his lips.

‘Heaven bless you, my child!’ he said, his voice trembling as he spoke. ‘I have wronged you bitterly in thought; but you must pardon me. I came, thinking to meet an ambitious aspiring woman; but I find

an angel. Would to heaven that it could have been otherwise — or,' he muttered, 'that this pride was humbled! I feel,' he continued aloud, 'that I am playing a hard part; but you will forgive me.'

Ella turned her face towards him with a sad and weary smile, and then one arm was thrown over Mrs. Brandon's shoulder, the little head drooped down as droops some storm-beaten flower, and, as it touched Mrs. Brandon's breast, there was a faint gasping sigh, and Sir Philip started forward.

'You had better leave us, Sir Philip Vining,' said Mrs. Brandon gravely; 'the poor child has fainted.'

And pale, trembling, and looking years older, Sir Philip walked with tottering steps to the door, paused, looked round, came back, and then kneeling, pressed his lips twice upon Ella's glossy hair, before, with

a sigh, he tore himself away, and was rapidly driven off.

At that self-same hour, light-hearted and hopeful, Charley Vining mounted his favourite mare to ride over to Laneton.

CHAPTER XI.

KITCHEN CANVASSING.

‘Now do tell us, there’s a dear man,’ said cook, alias Sarah Stock, to Edward, the hard-faced footman, as he sat in front of the kitchen fire at Copse Hall, gently rubbing his shins and ruminating; while the housemaid, with her workbox on the table, was pretending to be busy over some piece of useful needlework, though she was watching Edward the hard-faced with all her might.

For it was that cosy half-hour after supper when all was at peace in the mansion; when the late dinner things had all been washed up, the kitchen tidied, and cook had performed the operation which

she called setting herself straight—a manifest impossibility, for she was a circular woman of at least sixteen stone weight. All the same, though, she had changed her dress, polished her face till it shone, and then crowned herself with a gorgeous corona of lace and bright-hued ribbons and net-work, an edifice which she called her cap. The cat sat and purred upon the round smooth centre of the bright steel fender, winked at the fire, twitched its ears, and purred and ruminated at intervals; for it was fast nearing the hour when it would be shown the door for the night; so that it was getting itself thoroughly warmed through. The firelight danced in the bright tin dish-covers hung upon the wall, and then gleamed off, and dodged about from bright stew-pan to brass candlestick, and back again to the clean crockery and the dresser; the old Dutch clock swung its pen-

dulum busily to and fro, as if labouring under the mistake that it had nearly done work for the day; and altogether the place looked bright and snug, and spoke of the approaching hour of rest, when cook, having tapped the fire playfully here and there, to the destruction of several golden caverns in the centre, and taking up an apparently interrupted conversation, said, as above :

‘Now, do tell us, there’s a dear man;’ when the housemaid gave her head a toss, as much as to say, ‘What indelicacy!—don’t think I indorse that expression!’

Then she smiled with a kind of pitying contempt, for, according to her notions, cook and Edward were courting; and of course, if he chose to prefer a great fat coarse woman like that, he had a right to. And the slim maiden of thirty-eight bridled and looked almost as hard-faced as Edward himself. For though cook called him a dear

man, it almost seemed at first as if she were bantering him, till it was taken into consideration that every eye forms its own beauty. In fact, just then Edward looked more hard-faced and grim than ever.

‘You will tell us all about it, now won’t you?’ said cook, for Edward remained silent.

‘’Tain’t likely,’ said Edward at last.

‘Why not?’ said cook.

‘There was two buttons off my shirt in the very worst places on Sunday morning.’

‘I *am* sorry!’ exclaimed cook.

‘Don’t believe it!’ said Edward; ‘and it’s mean and unfair. Didn’t you say, if I’d always get your coals in, you’d always see to my buttons and darn my stockings? And at this present moment there’s a hole as big as a shilling in them as I’ve got on.’

‘But it sha’n’t never occur again, Ed-

dard, if you'll only tell us; for Mary and me is as interested as can be.'

'O, I don't care about knowing, if Mr. Edward don't choose to tell,' said the housemaid, with a toss of her head.

'Who's trying to pick a quarrel now?' retorted Edward; 'when missus said we was always to be peaceful and orderly in the kitchen.'

'Not me, I'm sure,' said the housemaid. 'I wouldn't bemean myself to quarrel.'

'Now don't, dear,' said cook; 'Mr. Edward's agoin' to tell us all about it, and really, you know, if it ain't for all the world like chapters out o' that book as missus had from Mugie's libery—the one you brought up out of the drawin'-room, and read of a night when we was in bed.'

'Stuff!' said the housemaid tartly.

'Now, don't say so, dear,' said the cook, who was particularly suave for once in her

life. 'There she is, just like a herrowine, and a nice-looking one too.'

'Get out! call her good-looking?' said the housemaid.

'Well, 'taint to be denied as she has what some folks would call good looks. Then you see she's pussycuted by one lover, and another loves her to distraction, and his father won't hear of it; and first one comes and then another, and then the father, and frightens the poor dear into fits, and goes away fainting—no, I mean goes away leaving her fainting away, and wanting salts and burnt feathers, and all sorts. Why, it's for all the world like a real story in a book, that it is; and I declare the way Mr. Eddard has told us all about it has been beautiful.'

'There's soft soap,' growled the hard-faced footman, smiling grimly.

'That it ain't now, I'm sure,' said cook.

‘It really was beautiful, and almost as good as seeing or reading it all. I’m sure I never lived in a house before where there was such goings on. I declare that bit where you told us about how you took the dandy by the scruff of his neck, and says to him, “Now, out you go, or I’ll stuff you up the chimney!” was as exciting as could be. And so it was where you dragged him across the hall, and pitched him neck and crop down the front steps. I could a’most see it; and we both of us did hear the door slam.’

‘Mr. Eddard,’ who had been slightly adding to the history of Ella’s visitors, smiled a little here, and his face relaxed somewhat from its stern expression.

‘Lor’, what a nice clear fire!’ said cook, who had detected the melting sign. ‘Let me hot you a sup of beer in a little stoopan, with a bit of nuckmeg and ginger, and a spoonful of sugar. Don’t say no, Eddard.’

‘Yes, I shall,’ said Edward, who was tightening up again. ‘I sha’n’t have none unless you two join with me.’

‘Well, if it comes to that,’ said cook, ‘sooner than you should go without, I’ll have the least taste in the world.’

The housemaid shook her head as if despising such excuses; but ten minutes after, when a mug of the hot sweet-scented compound was placed before her by cook, who winked at Edward as she did so, the lady of the dustpan and brush condescended to simper, and say, ‘O, the very idee!’ Then she smiled, and at the end of another ten minutes the trio were all smiling as they sat with their feet on the fender, Edward regaling himself and his fellow servants with an account of what had taken place during the afternoon.

‘I should say it was as near as could be three o’clock,’ said Edward punctiliously;

‘it might have been a little after, though I hadn’t heard it strike, or it might have been a little before : I ain’t certain. Anyhow, it was as near as could be to three o’clock when the front-door bell rings.

“ ‘Visitor for Miss Bedford,” I says to myself, laughing like, and meaning it as a joke; for as we’d had one that day, I didn’t of course expect no more.’

‘What time was it as Sir Philip Vining went away?’ said cook, who was deeply interested.

‘O, that was before lunch,’ said Edward.

‘To be sure, so it was,’ said the housemaid.

‘Well, I slips on my coat—for I was dusting the glasses over before going to lay the dinner-cloth—and up I goes.’

‘And up you goes,’ said cook; for Edward had paused to soften his hard face

with a little more of the stewpan decoction.

‘Yes, up I goes, to find it was Mr. Charles Vining, looking as bright and happy as could be—quite another man to what he was when he come last week.

“Ah,” I says to myself, “you don’t know about your governor being here afore lunch, young man, or you’d be laughing the other side of your mouth.” But I says aloud :

“To see Miss Bedford, sir?”

“No, my man,” he says ; and he looked at me very curious and hesitating, as if he’d like to have said “yes.” “Show me in to your mistress,” he says.’

‘Now it’s a-coming !’ said cook, rocking herself to and fro with excitement, and rubbing her hands softly together.

‘Now what’s a-coming, stoopid ?’ said Edward gruffly. ‘What d’ye mean ?’

‘I—I only meant that the interesting bit was now coming—the denowment, you know,’ said cook humbly, and seeking to mollify the insulted narrator by emptying the little stewpan, cloves, bits of ginger, and all into his mug.

‘If you’re so precious clever, you’d better tell it yourself,’ growled Edward fiercely, ‘instead of keeping on interrupting like that. Who’s to go on, I should like to know?’

‘O, I’m sure cook didn’t mean nothing, Mr. Eddard,’ said the interested housemaid. ‘Do go on!’

‘What’s she want to say anything for, if she don’t mean anything then, eh?’ grumbled Edward. ‘I hate such ways.’

Cook looked at housemaid, and slightly raised her hands, while the offended dignitary sipped and muttered, and muttered and sipped, and his audience waited, not

daring to speak, lest they should miss the rest of the expected treat.

‘I wouldn’t say another word if I hadn’t begun, that I wouldn’t!’ growled the hard-faced one. ‘Now, then, where’d I got to?’

“Show me in to your mistress,” exclaimed cook; when ‘Mr. Eddard,’ turning round upon her very sharply, she shrunk as it were into her shell, and nipped together her lips.

‘I tell you what it is,’ said Edward viciously; ‘if I’m to tell this here, I tells it, but I ain’t going to be driven wild with vexatious interruptions. Do you both want to know it, or don’t you?’

‘O yes, please, Mr. Eddard, we do indeed,’ exclaimed the two domestics; ‘so please go on!’

Thus adjured, and apparently mollified by the respect paid to him, as much as by the stewpan essence, ‘Mr. Eddard’ continued:

‘Well, I shows him into the breakfast-room, and then goes in to missus, who had just come down from Miss Bedford’s room; and looking all white and troubled, she goes across the hall, and I opens the door for her, and up comes my gentleman with a rush, catches her hand in his, and kisses it.

“That’s making yourself at home anyhow, young man,” I says to myself, backing out of the room; and I can’t say how it happened, but the corner of the carpet got rucked up, so that I was ever so long before I could get the door shut; and they would keep talking, so that I couldn’t help hearing what they said.’

‘And what did they say?’ said cook.

‘Ain’t I a-coming to it as fast as I can?’ said Edward angrily. ‘What an outrageous hurry you always are in with everything, except getting the dinner ready in time!’

‘Now don’t be cruel, Mr. Eddard,’ said the housemaid, tittering, when ‘Mr. Eddard’ himself condescended to laugh at what our Scotch brethren would call his own ‘wut,’ to the great discomfiture of cook, who wanted to fire-up and give them a bit of her mind, but did not dare, for fear of losing the end of the coveted history. The consequence of her reticence, though, was that ‘Mr. Eddard’ grew exceedingly amiable, and went on with his account.

‘That door being shut,’ he said, with a grim smile, which was meant to be pleasant, but was the very reverse, ‘I didn’t want to go; for I put it to you now, under the circumstances, was it likely as he’d stay long?’

‘Of course not!’ said cook.

‘Not likely!’ said the housemaid.

‘Well, then,’ continued Edward, ‘where was the use of me going back to my pantry

only to be called directly? So I took his hat and brushed it, and when I'd brushed it, and set it down, I set to and brushed it again, and so on half a dozen times, while—it was very foolish of them if they didn't want other people to hear—they kept on talking louder and louder.

““Mr. Vining,” says missus, “I must ask you as a gentleman to come no more.”

““But, in 'evin's name,” he says, “what have I done that you should turn upon me like this?”

““Nothing,” says missus; “nothing at all. I pity you from the bottom of my heart, as much as I pity that sweet girl; but it cannot be. You must come here no more.”

““Are you a woman?” he says. “Have you feeling? Can you form any idea of the pain your words are giving me?”

““Yes, yes, yes,” says missus. “Mr.

Vining, why do you force me to speak? I do not wish to cause trouble, but you drive me to do so."

" "Speak, then," he says, quite in another voice, "unless you wish to drive me mad, or to something worse—" There, I'm blessed,' continued Edward, breaking short off in his narrative, and pointing to the cook, 'did you ever see such a woman? Why, what are you snivelling about?'

'I—I—I c—c—c—can't help it, Eddard, when I think of what those poor things must be suffering,' sobbed cook, with a liberal application of her apron to her eyes.

'Suffer, indeed—such stuff!' said Edward.

'Ah, Eddard,' said cook, turning upon him a languishing look, 'if I have saved up forty-seven pound ten in the savings bank, I've a heart still, and know what it is for it

to bleed when some one says a hard word to me.'

The housemaid sniffed.

'I'm a going on,' said Edward, who was evidently moved by the culinary lady's remarks.

"Drive you," says Mr. Vining, "to speak! Why, stay!" he says excitedly, as if a thought had struck him. "Why, yes; I'm sure of it. My father has been here to-day."

"He has," says missus solemnly.

"It was cowardly and cruel!" cries Mr. Vining, quite shouting now, for his monkey was evidently up. "And pray, madam, what is the result of his visit? There, I can answer it myself: Miss Bedford refuses to see me; you decline to receive me into your house."

"Mr. Vining," says missus softly, and I could fancy that she took his hand, "I

grieve for you, as I do for that suffering girl."

"What!" cries Mr. Vining, "is she ill? Let me—let me see her—only once—for a minute, dear Mrs. Brandon! Pray—on my knees I beg it of you! You cannot be so cruel, so hardhearted, as to refuse!" And then I heard a loud sobbing wail as of a woman crying, and— There, I'm blest if I go on, if you will keep on snivelling. Why, blame the women, you're both on you at it!"

'We—we—we—we—we're—only a-blowin' our noses,' sobbed the housemaid.

'Never see such noses!' growled Edward, who then continued:

'Well, directly after, as if in a passion, Mr. Vining says:

"Mrs. Brandon, this is cruel and harsh. I left you last week with my hopes raised; to-day you dash them to the ground."

“Mr. Vining—Mr. Vining!” she says softly.

“I tell you this,” he says, shouting again; and hearing his words, you could almost see him stamping up and down the breakfast-room — “I tell you this, Mrs. Brandon: the ties of duty are strong, but the ties formed by the heart of a man newly awakened to love are stronger. To win Ella Bedford, my own love, I will give all—time, hope, everything; I will leave no stone unturned—I will stop at nothing! I see that she has been coerced—that she has been, as it were, cruelly stolen from me by external pressure; and it shall be my task to win her back. I had hoped to have had you on my side; as it is, I must begin my battle by myself. I thank you for your patient hearing of my words; but before I go I tell you this—that *till I learn that, by her own act, she gives herself*

to another, I will never cease from my pursuit."

'The next minute he was in the hall, and I handed him his hat, brushed as he never had it brushed before; when, even then, upset as he was, he puts his hand in his pocket, and pushed something into my fist.

"Sixpence," I says to myself, as I shut the door after him, and him a-walking away like mad.'

'Sixpence!' echoed the cook.

'Sixpence!' squeaked the housemaid.

'Well, it did feel like it, suttternly,' said Edward; 'but it was arf a suffrin'.'

'But what did he mean by never ceasing from the pursuit till she gave herself to another? Would she give herself to another?' said cook, who was very moist of eye.

'No, I should say not—never!' said the housemaid.

And so said, mentally, Charley Vining, as, disappointed and half maddened, he galloped homeward that afternoon; but the day came when, bitterly laughing to himself, he said otherwise, and hummed with aching heart the words of the old song :

‘ Shall I, wasting in despair,
Die because a woman’s fair ?’

And then he turned over and over in his hand—what ?

A wedding-ring !

CHAPTER XII.

MORE PASSION AND LITTLE PROGRESS.

‘BAI Jove ! she’s about the most skittish little filly I ever met with in the whole course of my experience,’ muttered Max Bray ; and then he went over mentally the many rebuffs he had encountered. Forbidden Mrs. Brandon’s house, he had all the same gone over day after day to Lane-ton, for the purpose of impressing Ella with a sense of the value of his attentions ; but still, though he displayed as much effrontery as a London rough, all went against him, and he found that, so far from meeting with a kindly greeting, his appearance was ever the signal for an immediate retreat.

‘ But you won’t tire me—bai Jove, you

won't!' said Max. 'I've set my mind, and it will keep set.'

And still day after day he rode over to Laneton, till not a walk could Ella take without catching sight of his mincing step and gracefully-attired figure; while, in spite of every effort, there were times when she could not avoid his addresses, as he stubbornly persisted in walking by her side.

'Bai Jove! it's of no use for you to harry and worry me,' drawled Max to Laura. 'I'm getting on as fast as I can.'

'But are your visits having any effect?' said Laura eagerly.

'Well, I'll be candid with you,' said Max. 'Not so much as I could wish in one quarter; but, bai Jove! I'm doing you a good turn in the other direction. He's as jealous as Othello—he is, bai Jove! He meets me now with a scowl like a stage

villain, confound him! But he gets on no better there than I do.'

Max Bray was very decided in what he said; but though debarred from visiting, like himself, at Copse Hall, Charley Vining was under the impression that he did get on much better than friend Max. The very sight of Ella, even at a distance, was to him a pleasure; and in spite of many disappointments, he was never weary of his twenty-four-mile ride, counting himself a happier man when, by a lucky chance, he was able to catch a glimpse of Ella, if but for a minute. While upon the day when Max made the above remarks, Charley Vining had not only seen, but spoken to Ella—not only spoken to, but won from her— But stay—we are premature.

Weeks had passed since, exactly as had been described by Edward the hard-faced footman, Charley Vining had had an in-

terview with Mrs. Brandon, to learn that in future he must never call there, nor expect the slightest aid to be given to him, or even to have his suit countenanced; and then it was that, angry and determined, the young man had left the house with the intention of leaving no stone unturned to win an answer to his love.

To this end, day after day he would watch the house, thinking nothing of the weary waiting hours, though it seemed that as little heed was paid to the distance by Max Bray, who now made no secret of his pursuit, carrying it on in open defiance of his rival—the two meeting constantly, but never speaking. In fact, Charley was rather glad of this; for after the last interview with Laura, it had seemed to him that he must be for the future upon unfriendly terms with the Bray family, though Laura, whenever they met, was more gen-

tle and pleading than ever, although she must have seen that Charley shrank from her.

‘*Nil desperandum*’ seemed to be the motto adopted by all; and at length came the day when Charley’s heart leaped, for he told himself that his perseverance was to have its reward.

He had ridden over as was his custom, put up his horse at Laneton, and was then listlessly strolling towards Copse Hall, in the hope that he might be favoured by, at all events, a glimpse of Ella, when he turned from the road, leaped a stile, and took a path which led through the copse from which the Hall was named.

There was no especial reason for going that way, only that he was as likely to encounter Ella walking — which was not often — in one direction as another; so he made up his mind to go through the copse

by the broad winding path which led round the back of the Hall, then to make his way into the lane by Croppley Magna, walk on and see the old lady who had received him into her house when he had his bad hunting fall, and then return to where his horse awaited him.

He had entered the copse, walking very slowly, and thinking deeply of the unsatisfactory state of affairs, when suddenly he was awakened from his musing by the sound of merry childlike laughter. A little girl dashed round a bend of the walk, closely followed by another, and then, passing him quickly, they were out of sight in an instant, just as, dreamy and thoughtful, Ella, with her head bent down, came round the bend of the path — came slowly on, nearer and nearer to where Charley stood, with palpitating heart; and the next moment, as she started from her reverie, it

was with Charley holding her hand tightly in his.

‘Ella!’ he said, the word being as it were forced from his panting breast.

‘Mr. Vining!’ she exclaimed softly, as for a moment she met his gaze, starting not from him, neither struggling to release her hands, but looking up at him with a soft pleading look, that seemed to say, ‘You know all that I have promised. Why do you persecute me?’

· ‘Ella,’ he said again, ‘at last!’

· ‘Mr. Vining,’ she said wearily, ‘please loose my hands and let me return. This is folly; it is unjust to me and to Sir Philip Vining. You know what I have promised to him.’

‘I know what was cruelly wrung from you,’ he said bitterly; ‘but I cannot think that you will adhere to it. Ella, dearest Ella, do you doubt my love?’

She turned her eyes sadly to his for a moment, as he still held her a prisoner.

‘You believe me, then ! You know how earnest I am !’ cried Charley.

‘Yes—yes!’ she answered, her face bearing still the same sad weary expression.

‘Listen to me, then,’ continued Charley, his words sounding deep and husky. ‘If we were what you would call equals in station—an utterly false position—if I were some poor penniless tutor or curate telling you of my love, pleading to you earnestly, showing you in every way how dear you were to me, would you then—could you then—return that love?’

There was a silence for a few moments, and then, in a weak unguarded moment, Ella raised her eyes once more to his, to gaze, in spite of herself, fondly and earnestly, as she faintly breathed the one word ‘Yes.’

. The next moment she had repented; for he had clasped her in his arms, to kiss her fondly again and again, as frightened and struggling she strove to escape.

‘Pray—pray, Mr. Vining,’ she sobbed; ‘this is cruel—it is unfair to me;’ and then she upbraided herself for her weakness.

But the next moment he was walking by her side, holding one hand still captive, as he urged and pleaded with a love-awakened earnestness, while Ella thought of all she had promised to Sir Philip Vining, and upbraided herself bitterly for not leaving Copse Hall, though the blame, if any, was not hers, since Mrs. Brandon had again and again refused to hear of her departure. At last she roused herself, and for the next five minutes it was another spirit that contended with that of Charles Vining.

‘Mr. Vining,’ she said, as quietly but firmly she withdrew her hand; and he saw

that, though deeply moved, there was a quiet determined will in existence—‘ Mr. Vining, you tell me that you love me.’

‘ And you believe me,’ cried Charley hastily.

‘ And I believe you,’ said Ella steadily and hurriedly. ‘ For the sake, then, of that love—for my sake and my future welfare in this world, leave me—try to see me no more—strive to forget all the past, and let these words of yours be to you as some sad dream.’

‘ If I forget all this—’

‘ Hush!’ she exclaimed firmly; ‘ and remember my prayer to you. I ask you to do all this for my sake—for the sake of the love you bear me. I have promised that I would meet you no more, and that promise I must keep.’

‘ Stop!’ cried Charley angrily, for she had turned to go. ‘ I love you well, as you

know—too well to accede to what you ask—and I tell you now, as I have told those who have importuned me so to do, that I will never, so long as I can see the faintest spark of affection for me, give you up. I go now, Ella, to wait—to wait patiently, even if it be for years. If rumours, set afloat by interested people, meet your ears, credit nothing that tells of want of faith on my part to you. I will be patient, and wait till you are less cruel—till you relent towards me; for now you are to me, I may say, harsh. But recollect this: by your treatment you condemn me to a life of misery and wretchedness, for I can never again know peace. You wish me to leave you?’

‘Yes,’ said Ella hoarsely; and without another word, he turned and strode away, his brow knit, and the veins swollen and knotted; but had he turned then, in the

midst of his hot anger and disappointment at what he called her cold heartless cruelty, he would have seen so pitiful, so longing a look in Ella's eyes, that he would the next moment have been asking pardon at her feet.

But he did not turn ; and the next moment the bend in the pathway hid him from her sight, as with a sigh that seemed to cut its way from her heart, she, too, slowly turned, pressed her hands together, and walked sadly back to Mrs. Brandon's, closely followed by her charge.

CHAPTER XIII.

FOR ANOTHER CAMPAIGN.

THREE months had glided away with, at the end of that time, matters still in the same unsatisfactory state. There had been no open collision between Max Bray and his sturdy rival; but Laura had long since learned that, while Max persisted in his present course, there was no prospect for her to be even on friendly terms with Charley Vining. She had told her brother this; but he had angrily bade her be silent and wait, when all would be right in the end.

So Laura waited, to find that Charley now totally ignored her existence, spending his time either in sitting moodily in his own room, or else in riding over to Lane-ton.

But Max Bray was not idle: he literally haunted Laneton; so that at last Ella was quite confined to the house, and Mrs. Brandon had looked grave.

Then came a visit from Sir Philip Vining, who again saw Ella, to part from her with a kind, gentle, fatherly farewell; and this was the result:

There were tears flowing fast at Copse Hall; for her few months' stay at Mrs. Brandon's had been sufficient to endear Ella to all there.

Edward, the hard-faced, had confided to cook that he didn't know how things would go now; while upon cook weeping, and drying her eyes with her apron, he told her that her conduct was 'childish, and wus.'

The housemaid looked as if she had a violent cold in her head; while the children sobbed aloud; for the day had arrived when



Ella Bedford was to leave Copse Hall ; Mrs. Brandon, though knowing well enough for some time past that such a course would be the better, yet only now having given her consent, and that too most unwillingly.

Ella Bedford was to leave Copse Hall, but only for a year. Mrs. Brandon declared a twelvemonth would no doubt serve to alter the state of affairs, and then she could return.

‘For I shall never be happy till I get you back again, child!’ Mrs. Brandon exclaimed. ‘And mind this, my love : I hope that you will be happy with Mrs. Marter, who is a distant relative of my late husband ; but, come what may in the future, there is always a home for you here. Write and say you are coming, or come without writing, and you shall always find a warm welcome. These are no unmeaning words, child, but the utterances of one

whom you have made to feel sincerely attached to you.'

'I know that,' said Ella softly, as she clung to the motherly arm at her side.

'I would never have consented to your going, only I cannot help thinking that it may be for the best in the end; though really, now it has come to the point, I don't know what I can have been thinking about, not to decide and leave here myself for a few months. But you promise me faithfully that you will write often, and that at any time, if there is any unpleasantness, you will acquaint me?'

'Yes,' said Ella, smiling sadly, 'I promise.'

'I think you will find Mrs. Marter kind to you; and I have said everything that I could.'

There was an affectionate leave-taking; and then, once more, Ella awoke to the fact

that she was driven from the home where she had hoped to be at rest. But this time she bore up bravely, in the hope that the end of a year would again find her an occupant of Mrs. Brandon's pleasant home, where unvarying kindness and consideration had been her portion from the day when, low-spirited and desponding, she had first entered what seemed to be the gloomy portals of a prison.

She told herself that, with the battle of life to fight, she must not give way to despondency ; and nerving herself for all that she might have to encounter, she sat back in the fly, glancing anxiously from side to side, to see if she were observed, and in spite of her efforts trembling excessively, lest at any moment a turn of the road should reveal the figure of Max Bray or Charley Vining. It did not matter which should appear, she felt equal dread of the encounter ;

but upon that occasion she was not called upon to summon up her often-tested resolution.

The station was reached in safety, her modest luggage labelled for London; and this time she had taken the precaution of having no farther address, to act as a clue for those who sought her.

The train sped on, and in due course, and without farther adventure, she reached the terminus, engaged a cab, when, breathing freely, under the impression that she had thoroughly escaped pursuit, she was soon being rattled over the stones of the great metropolis.

CHAPTER XIV.

A NEW HOME.

POOR Ella! in her happy innocence she did not know that she was as surely leaving a trail by which she could be tracked, as did the child in the story, who sprinkled a few ashes behind her from time to time as she went through the wood. Poor girl! she did not even notice the railway company's official, book in hand, taking the number of each cab, and asking the drivers where they were to set down.

No, she was free this time; but she said those words with a strange feeling of sadness as she leaned back. But the next minute she summoned resolution to her aid, and sat gazing from the window at the hurry and bustle around.

Crescent Villas, Regent's-park, the residence of Mrs. St. Clair Marter, was Ella's destination. By rights it was Mr. St. Clair Marter's house, but his lady always spoke of it as her place; and as he dared not contradict her, so the matter rested.

Ella entered a pleasantly-furnished hall neatly floorclothed, and with groups of flowers and statuary, all in excellent taste. There was an air of luxury and refinement in the place, which was, however, totally spoiled by the tawdry livery of the footman, who muttered and grumbled a good deal about having to lift in the boxes, to the great amusement of cabby, who kindly advised him not to over-exert himself, for the reason that good people were very scarce.

But the door was closed at last, and the footman departed to announce the new-comer.

‘Let her wait a bit!’ said a sharp voice, as the door was held open; and the ‘bit’ the young traveller had to wait was about three-quarters of an hour, for no earthly reason save that Mrs. St. Clair Marter wished, as she said, ‘to teach her her place.’

But at last there was the tinkling of a bell somewhere in the lower regions; the footman ascended, entered what Ella supposed to be the drawing-room, and then returned to say gruffly,

‘Now, miss, this way, please!’

And Ella was shown into the presence of her new mistress.

As a rule, no doubt, a young lady engaged to act as governess in a family would speak of the feminine head of that family as her employer, or the lady whose daughter she instructed. She might easily find some other term that would avoid that word

which expresses the relation between hirer and servant; but Mrs. St. Clair Marter always spoke of herself as the mistress of the ladies she engaged to act as governess to her children, and therefore we say that Ella was shown into the presence of her new mistress.

Mrs. St. Clair Marter was a very diminutive lady, with a flat countenance, and very frizzly fair hair. She gave a visitor the idea of having been a small negress carefully bleached or made 'beautiful for ever;' while the first glance told that, had she really been a sufferer from the slave-trade, whatever others may have valued and sold her at, her purchase at her own valuation would have been a ruinous speculation. She was dressed in the height of ultra-fashion, and reclined upon a couch perfectly motionless, evidently for fear of making creases; for her dress was care-

fully spread out over the back and foot, with every fold and plait arranged as may be seen any day behind plate glass at the establishments of Messrs. Grant and Gask, Marshall and Snellgrove, or Peter Robinson ; and upon Ella's entrance, Mrs. Marter inspected her for full a minute through a large gold-rimmed eyeglass.

'Ah!' she said at last, with an expiration of the breath, and a look as if she had just made a discovery, 'you are the young person recommended to me by Mrs. Brandon ?'

Ella bowed.

'Exactly. I have a good deal to say to you about the young ladies, but I'm afraid my memory will not allow me to recall it at present. I daresay, though, that I shall recollect a little from time to time.'

Ella remained standing ; for Mrs. Marter, doubtless from having to recall so

much, entirely forgot to invite her dependent to a seat.

‘I am very particular about my governesses, Miss Bedford,’ said the lady; ‘and mind, I don’t at all approve of their making friends of, or associating with, the other servants. I expect, too, that the young person I have in the house to superintend my children’s education will rise early. The young ladies’ linen, of course, you will keep in order, and assist the nurse in dressing them of a morning. Let me see, I think Mrs. Brandon said you understood German?’

‘Yes,’ said Ella quietly.

‘And Italian?’

‘Yes,’ was the reply.

‘French, and music, and singing, of course you know; but really I must make a point of examining you in these subjects, for the trouble one has with governesses is

something terrible. They all profess to know so much, and all the while they know next to nothing. Where were you educated?’

‘Principally at home,’ said Ella patiently.

‘At home!’ exclaimed Mrs. Marter. ‘Dear me; I’m sorry to hear that. I don’t think much of home education. I ought to have seen you and talked matters over; but I trusted entirely to Mrs. Brandon, as you were so far off. However, I suppose we must see how you get on.’

‘I will do my best to give you satisfaction,’ said Ella meekly, though her heart sank the while she spoke.

‘Yes, that’s what Miss Tuggly said; and before she had been here a week, she actually contradicted me to my face—before the young ladies, too. Ah! there’s another thing, too, I may as well say: Mr.

Marter likes to be read to of an evening, and you will have to do that, for my lungs are in such a state, that I cannot read half a page without a fit of coughing. And of course you will have to come into the drawing-room tidy; but mind, I don't approve of dress, and governesses imitating their employers. I think it better to say these few words, so that there may be no unpleasantness after.'

Ella bowed again, and sought in her inward spirit for firmness to bear all that might fall to her lot during the next twelve months.

'You may go now, Miss Bedford,' said Mrs. Marter, letting fall her great eyeglass with a loud rattling of gold chain; and Ella turned to leave.

The next instant she was summoned back.

'O! really, Miss Bedford,' exclaimed

the lady, 'that will never do! Just what I feared when you told me of your home education. Not the slightest deportment! Pray, how can you ever expect to teach young ladies, when you do not know how to leave a room decently yourself? Pray be careful for the future, whatever you do! A ladylike bearing is so essential, as you must be aware! There, you may go now. Thomas will show you to the schoolroom, and you may ask the upper housemaid to take you to your bedroom, which, by the way, I visit myself once a week. I say that as a hint respecting the way in which I expect it to be kept. That will do, Miss Bedford.'

Ella again turned to leave, but only to be stayed once more.

'O, by the way, Miss Bedford, I have a great objection to my servants—I mean, to those in my employ—having followers;

I mean visitors. Of course, upon some particular occasion, if I were asked, I should not say no to your mother and father visiting you; but what I mean, Miss Bedford, is that I do not allow young men followers.'

Ella's face was now aflame, partly at the coarseness of the words, partly at the remembrance of the way in which she had been visited while at Mrs. Brandon's; and she trembled as she thought of the consequences of her retreat being discovered.

'I think that is all I have to say now,' said Mrs. Marter. 'But stay: the young ladies may as well be summoned before you go away. Have the goodness to ring that bell.'

Ella obeyed, and the result was the coming of the footman in drab and scarlet, with dirty stockings, and an imperfectly-powdered head—that is to say, it was

snowy in front, and greasy and black in the rear.

‘Let the young ladies know that I wish to see them directly, Thomas,’ said the lady.

‘Yes, mum,’ said Thomas, who, on turning, winked at Ella, not from impertinence, but from an ignorant desire to be upon friendly terms.

Five minutes of utter silence now ensued, when there was a distant squeal, a rush of feet, then a noise as of some one falling downstairs, followed by a loud howl.

‘Bless me—those children!’ said Mrs. Marter faintly; and directly after the young ladies came tumbling into the room.

CHAPTER XV.

THE YOUNG LADIES.

ELLA BEDFORD might well be excused for looking with astonished eyes at the three juveniles to whom she was expected to teach deportment in connection with music and language—British and foreign ; for the first that presented herself was a square-shaped child of about six, very red-eyed and smudgy from the application of a pair of grubby fists to remove the tears not yet dry, evidently on account of the absence of a pocket-handkerchief, which absence was also plainly otherwise manifested.

Number two, about a year and a half older, was a young lady gifted with a perpetual sniff, in which she indulged as she stood and stared at the new governess, an

operation she was abetted in by number three, a young lady of ten, with tousley hair, and an inclination to rub one ear with a bony bare shoulder, which was continually hitching itself out of the loose shoulder-straps, and rising up as its owner gave herself a writhe, and then lolled against the drawing-room table, which creaked audibly at the infliction.

‘This, my dears,’ said Mrs. Marter, pointing at Ella with her gold eye-glass, and speaking in an imposing showman-like voice, as if she was exhibiting some new curiosity—‘this, my dears, is Miss Bedford, your new governess. Eleonora, you may shake hands with her.’

Thus adjured, Eleonora, the eldest and tousley of head, gave her shoulder a hitch out of the straps, and sulkily held out a hand elegantly veined and marbled from the want of saponaceous applications.

‘Alicia, you may shake hands with your new governess,’ said Mrs. Marter again, evidently addressing the second daughter, who did not move. ‘Alicia, did you hear me? Go and shake hands with your new instructress.’

‘Sha’n’t!’ said Alicia, twisting her feet about so as to loosen a shoe, and sniffing directly afterwards in a defiant manner.

‘What do I hear?’ exclaimed Mrs. Marter. ‘Go directly, and shake hands with Miss Bedford!’

‘Sha’n’t!’ said Alicia, tucking her hands behind her, and sniffing again abundantly, as she, to show her dislike to governesses in general, made what is termed ‘a face’ at the new-comer—that is to say, she contracted the skin of her little snub nose, half-closed her eyes, and lolled out her tongue in a most prepossessing manner; though Ella, not being of the medical pro-

fession, could very well have dispensed with the last attention.

‘Alicia, I’ve told you before that that is very coarse and vulgar,’ said Mrs. Marter mildly, for the young lady’s back being turned, she did not see the physiognomical contortions. ‘You must not say “sha’n’t!” but, if you do not wish to shake hands with Miss Bedford: “I would rather not,” or, “I do not wish to do so.”—Selina, my darling, you will do as mamma tells you—won’t you? Now, my love, you go and shake hands with your new governess.’

Ella took a step forward, and held out her hand, when mamma’s darling’s face contracted, and directly after she spat fiercely at the new-comer, and then ran howling behind the sofa.

‘Naughty Seliny—naughty Seliny!’ said Mrs. Marter. ‘You see, Miss Bedford, you

are strange to them yet. They will know you better soon.'

'I sha'n't do no lessons,' said Alicia defiantly; 'and I've burnt my book.'

'Fie, fie!' said Mrs. Marter sweetly.

'Licy pushed me downstairs, mar,' said the darling behind the sofa.

'No, I didn't,' shouted Alicia; 'she tumbled.'

'There's a big story!' cried Eleonora. 'She put her hands on her back, mar, and pushed her as hard as she could—'

Smack!

'Boo—boo—bo—oh!'

Before Miss Eleonora had finished her sentence, her sweet sister had smitten her upon the mouth so sharply, that her lip bled, and she burst forth into a loud howl.

'There, my dears, I cannot have this to-day.—Miss Bedford, be kind enough to see them into the schoolroom.—There, it's

of no use, Selina; if you will not go, you must be carried.—There, for goodness' sake, Miss Bedford, what are you thinking about? Take her up in your arms and carry her.'

Ella obeyed; for Miss Selina had refused to leave the room, clinging tightly to mamma's skirts till she was carried off, fighting furiously, and slapping and scratching at her bearer's face in such a way that, could Charley Vining have been a spectator, he would have been frantic.

'Never mind her scratching,' said the eldest girl; 'she always does like that. This way.'

And in a few moments more Ella was able to deposit her precious charge in the schoolroom, where, set free, the sweet innocent revenged herself again by spitting, till the upper housemaid was summoned, and led Ella to her own room.

'I pity you, miss, I do,' said the woman

kindly. 'You're no more fit to manage them young ribs than nothing. They're spoilt in the drawing-room, and encouraged in everything.'

'Thank you,' said Ella gently; 'you mean kindly, I am sure; but pray say no more. Let me find it out by degrees.'

'Well, that's best, certainly, miss,' said the woman, who eagerly assisted her to take off her things, and then hurried down to help get up the luggage; while Ella—did she break down and burst into weak tears?

No; smiling sadly, she determined to bear the burden that was to be hers, and nerved herself for the coming battle; so that when the housemaid returned and helped uncord the luggage, she was rewarded with a sweet and cheerful smile, which was repeated when she said she would go down and make Miss Bedford a cup of tea.

Ten minutes later, when, after coaxing

the kettle to boil with a few pieces of bundle London fire-wood, she was making that infusion that is considered by the fair sex to be a balm and refreshment for every pain and fatigue, she expressed herself loudly to her fellow-servants, to the effect that 'that was quite an angel they had got upstairs. But it's my belief,' she added, 'that the poor thing don't know what she's got to put up with.'

CHAPTER XVI.

CHANGE OF SCENE.

It was not until Ella had been gone a fortnight that Charley Vining learned the news of her departure ; as it happened, upon the same day that it was brought home to Max Bray that his visits to Laneton were of no effect.

But he was shrewd, was Max Bray ; and encountering Charley directly after, and reading his disappointment in his face, he assumed an air of perfect contentment himself, played with the ring upon his watch-chain, and passed his rival with a mocking smile.

Five minutes after, Charley was at Copse Hall face to face with Edward the hard,

who encountered him with a shake of the head.

‘Show me in to your mistress,’ said Charley hoarsely; and it was done.

Mrs. Brandon was seated working, but she rose, evidently much agitated, as her visitor entered to catch her hands in his, and look imploringly in her face.

‘I have only just learned the news,’ he said. ‘Dear Mrs. Brandon, you know why I have come! Be pitiful! See how I suffer! Tell me where she is gone!’

‘I cannot,’ was the gentle reply, as, with a mother’s tenderness, Mrs. Brandon pressed him back into a seat. ‘You forget that I have given my word to Sir Philip.’

Charley groaned bitterly.

‘You are all against me!’ he cried reproachfully. ‘You measure me by others. You do not know the depth of my feelings towards her. You all think that in a few

days—a month—a year—all will be forgotten; but, Mrs. Brandon, it grows upon me with the obstacles I encounter. But you will at least tell me to what part of England she has gone ?

Mrs. Brandon shook her head.

‘It was her wish—her express wish—that her retreat should not be known, Mr. Vining; and, in addition to what I promised to your father, I must respect that wish.’

Charley looked sternly at her for a moment, and then rose, and without a word left the room; Mrs. Brandon following him with a sympathising look, till the door closed upon him.

‘I must be a boy—a simple boy!’ muttered Charley fiercely; ‘for they treat me as such. My father, this Mrs. Brandon, and even Max Bray laugh at me! But,’ he muttered fiercely, ‘I may be a boy; but these

bitternesses will soon make me a man—such a man as they do not dream of! Give her up? Yes, when I see her in Max Bray's arms—not before!

Then he laughed, almost lightly, at the utter impossibility of such a termination, and returned to Blandfield after vainly trying to obtain information at the Lanton station of Ella's whereabouts. He could find that a young lady answering his description had taken a ticket for London; that was all; and in spite of his laugh of assurance, that was all the information that had so far been obtained by Max Bray.

But there are ways and means of finding all who play at hide and seek; England, as a rule, proving to be too small a place to conceal those who are diligently sought.

Max Bray knew that well enough; and returning to town, he sat tapping his white teeth as he made his plans; on the whole

feeling very well satisfied at the change in the base of operations, since, in spite of his hippopotamus hide, he was beginning to be a little annoyed at the notice taken of his visits to Laneton. Old women were in the habit of thrusting their heads out of their cottage doors to watch him; servant-girls would titter; and on more than one countenance of the male sex there would often be a stolid grin.

It was satisfactory, then, on the whole, for London presented many advantages to a scheming mind; but the first thing to be found out was whether Ella were in London.

Max was seated in one of the windows of his club, as he ran over his arrangements; then rising, he ordered a cab, and drove away, ignorant of the fact that the hall boy was imitating his gestures for the benefit of the porter, who was convulsed with laughter.

That same day, without a word to Sir Philip, Charley started for town.

A week later, and, to his surprise, Charley Vining, who was staying at Long's, involuntarily raised his hat as the Brays' carriage passed him, with Mrs. Bray and Laura on the back seat, Nelly and a stranger on the front. So introspective was Charley as he stood upon the hotel steps, that the carriage would have passed him unnoticed if a loud shrill voice had not shouted his name, when, starting and looking up, he saw Nelly, flushed and excited, leaning over the side of the barouche, as if ready to jump into his arms. But the carriage passed on; and though by a little exertion he might easily have overtaken it in the crowded street, beyond raising his hat, Charley made no movement.

Ten minutes after, an empty hansom passing, Charley hailed it, gave his orders,

and was soon being spun along through the streets, thinking over the encounter he had just had, and wondering whether Sir Philip Vining would be the next to make his appearance.

‘To see what I am doing!’ said Charley bitterly. And then his thoughts reverted to the past, and he came to the conclusion that it does not fall to the lot of any of us to pass a life of uninterrupted happiness, such as his had been until he first set eyes upon Ella.

‘Branksome-street, sir?’ cried the driver through his little trap-door. ‘Number nineteen, sir?’

‘How did you know that I wanted number nineteen?’ said Charley pettishly; ‘I did not name a number.’

‘Lor’ bless you, sir, this makes, I should think, a score of times I’ve been here in the course of a couple of years’ hansom-driving.

I never come wunst when it was a growler I druv. You want number nineteen, sir—private-inkviry orfice—that's what you want.'

'And how did you know that?' said Charley, who could not help feeling amused.

'How did I know that, sir?' grinned the man. 'It's a sort of instinkt, sir, as is only possessed by drivers of kebs. Here you are, sir—number nineteen. Up on the first floor for Mr. Whittrick.'

Charley leaped out, ran up the stairs indicated; and directly after he was in the office of Mr. Whittrick, of private-inquiry celebrity.

CHAPTER XVII.

PRIVATE INQUIRY.

WAITING your turn in a dull cheerless room along with half a dozen more people who always seem oil to your water or *vice versa*, so as to insure non-mixing, is about one of the most unpleasant things in life. It is bad enough at the doctor's, where you sit and wonder what is the matter with your neighbours right or left, and whether their complaints are infectious ; but at a private-inquiry office at a busy time it is ten times worse. There is such a general disposition evinced by everybody to turn his back on everybody else ; an act which the actor soon finds out to be an utter impossibility ; for though he gets on very well with respect

to two or three, he soon finds that, however clever a mathematician he may be, he cannot place himself in the required position; and, as a matter of course, he turns rusty, and resents the presence of the other waiters—waiters, of course not in the hotel and coffee-room sense of the term.

To do Charley Vining justice, he was as ill-tempered as any one present; but he refrained from showing it, and tried to tranquillise his mind into a state of wonderment as to the business of others present. Was there any one seeking the address of some daughter or sister very dear?—was any one moved by the tender passion? It did not seem like it, judging from the countenances around.

One lady of vinegary aspect was evidently in search of a husband who had vanished; while on the other side was a little squeezy mild man, who might have

come on a similar errand respecting a wife. The gentleman in speckless black, with papers in his hand tied with red tape, looked legal, and took snuff or pounce frequently from a small box, which he tapped with considerable grace, so as to bring the dust from the corner into a heap in the centre. His mission was evidently respecting a legatee, heir-at-law, administrator, executor, or assign, whose presence was necessary for the completion of some deed, document, or preamble as aforesaid.

What a wheezy stout man wanted was doubtful; but it was evident that the quiet-looking unassuming man who came out softly from the inner sanctum, and in one glance took down and mentally recorded all who were present, had something to do with order as well as law.

And it was so, in fact; for the quiet unassuming man was Mr. Orger, of the

detective department of Great Scotland-yard, who, after a fortnight of unavailing search for some gentleman who was wanted, did not think it derogatory to his dignity to seek counsel—on the principle of two heads being better than one—from his old friend and fellow-inspector Mr. Whittrick, of the detective force formerly, but now professionally engaged upon his own account.

Charley's turn at last, just as he had come to the conclusion that he would wait no longer, but call another day, when there were not so many private inquirers.

Obedying a signal, he was shown into a well-furnished room with a couple of tables, at one of which, whose top was covered with papers, sat a very ordinary-looking man, in a black-velvet cap; at the other, which bore a telegraphic dial, were a couple of clerks busily writing.

‘Perhaps you will step this way,’ said the man of the black-velvet cap, mentally photographing his visitor the while; and Charley followed him to an inner room, where, taking the seat offered, he paid certain fees and stated his case.

‘Young lady—deep mourning—fair—gray eyes—luxuriant hair,’ muttered the private-inquiry high priest, as he took notes during Charley’s explanations, trying hard to suppress a smile as he saw his client’s earnestness. ‘Came up from Laneton on the 9th, to the South Midland Terminus,’ he continued.

‘Well, Mr. Vining?’

‘Well,’ said Charley, ‘I must have her address found!’

‘The information you give is very meagre, sir,’ said Mr. Whittrick quietly.

‘It is, I know,’ said Charley impetuously: ‘but I must have that address.

Here,' he exclaimed, drawing out his portemonnaie and placing a couple of crisp new ten-pound notes upon the table, 'do not stand for expense. That is all I have with me; but tell me what you require, and you shall have it.'

'Thanks, sir,' said Mr. Whittrick quietly, as he transferred the notes to his pocket-book, after entering the transaction and the numbers in a book. 'But you give us the credit of great powers, sir.'

'Well,' said Charley, 'you have great powers: telegraphy and a cordon of spies, I have no doubt. All you require is something to set the mechanism at work, and I tell you frankly I am ready to supply that something liberally.'

'You would not consider those two notes ill spent for a little certain information, I suppose, sir?'

'No, nor double !' said Charley hastily.

‘Good,’ said Mr. Whittrick; and rising, he took a whistle from the mouth of a speaking tube in the wall, whispered a few words, and then applied his ear.

The answer came in half a minute; and then he gave some other order, replugged the tube, and sitting down, made some remark touching the present ministry.

‘But I am keeping you,’ said Charley, who took the remark as an intimation that he might go. ‘Tell me when I may come again?’ he said, rising.

‘Stop a bit—stop a bit, Mr. Vining: I never like doing things in a hurry. Let’s economise time; and we can now you are here,’ said Mr. Whittrick. ‘It may save my sending to Long’s Hotel, and wasting time, and men, and cab-hire, and perhaps not then to find you. I shall have a reply directly to a question I have asked. And, besides, you have entirely omitted to

give me the young lady's age and name. —Ah, Smith, that will do,' he said, as a clerk entered the room with a sheet of paper.

The clerk left the room; and then, after running through the manuscript note, Mr. Whittrick took out a double eye-glass, rubbed it leisurely, and then fixed it by its spring upon the bridge of his nose.

'You'd be surprised, Mr. Vining,' he said, 'what a deal of difficulty I have to get clerks who write a plain legible hand. I'm a terrible scrawler myself; but then my writing has to keep up with my thoughts, and has to struggle hard, with the certainty of failure always before it. But my clerks are well paid to do nothing else but copy; and really at times, either from hurry or carelessness, their stuff is almost undecipherable. But let me see; I think I have managed this, though.'

‘Is that anything relating to my search?’ said Charley excitedly.

‘Stop a minute, my dear sir, and we’ll see,’ said Mr. Whittrick; and then he held the slip of paper in his hand as if about to read aloud.

CHAPTER XVIII.

SECOND-HAND.

AT the last words uttered by Mr. Whittrick, Charley Vining started forward, and gazed at the speaker as if he would have devoured the ordinary-looking slip of paper rustling before him. It was with the greatest difficulty that he refrained from snatching the memorandum from its holder; for in every respect save one, Mr. Whittrick, of the black-velvet cap, was outwardly an excessively slow man. He had crawled to the speaking-tube and crawled back, and when he took the slip of paper from the clerk, it was as if the effort was too much for him—so much, in fact, that he had hard work to wipe his double eye-glasses.

But we said that there was an excep-

tion, and this lay in Mr. Whittrick's eyes, which gave a sharpness to his whole appearance, as they twinkled and darted and played as it were, while they displayed the activity of their owner's brains.

But, apparently satisfied that if he kept him waiting half an hour longer, Charley Vining would not say anything that would be of service for information of any kind, Mr. Whittrick commenced reading :

'9th instant. Miss Ella Bedford, age about twenty; fair; gray eyes; thick braided hair—*not false*; height about five feet two; dressed in deep mourning; arrived by forty-five, A.M., train from Lanelton. Robert Wilks, porter, No. 93, called four-wheeled cab, V.R. 09876, John Round driver. Luggage : canvas-covered box, black enamelled bag, and leather wallet, *not addressed*. Set down at 19 Crescent Villas, Regent's-park—Mr. St. Clair Marter's. Cab-

man paid. No farther communication; but footman averse to taking in luggage, whether from idleness or particular reasons not known; shall know shortly, if necessary. Cab returned to terminus.'

'Let me see,' continued Mr. Whittrick, turning the paper on the other side. 'No, that is all we know at present;' and he looked at Charley, who, mute with astonishment, was staring hard at him.

'Why, good heavens! how did you know that?' he cried. 'That is all I wanted to know.'

'At present—at present!' said Mr. Whittrick, with a smile.

'But I expected days of waiting and anxiety,' cried Charley, eagerly seizing the paper.

'Possibly,' said Mr. Whittrick; 'but there are times, you see, when we are speedy in our movements.'

‘But I am astounded!’ cried Charley.
‘You make me almost to believe in magicians.’

Mr. Whittrick smiled deprecatingly and shrugged his shoulders.

‘How did you obtain the information?’ cried Charley.

‘My dear sir,’ said Mr. Whittrick, ‘that is my profession. If you go to a doctor and he gives you a prescription which cures you, do you ask him how he discovered his drugs? Of course not. You came to me for assistance, and showed me that you were ready to pay liberally for that assistance, and, of course, I set to work instantler.’

‘But is that—are you sure—that Miss—that the young lady is there?’

‘Certainly not,’ said Mr. Whittrick; ‘some time has passed since then. But I am ready to make affidavit that she was

there. Now then, sir, what can I do for you next?’

‘Nothing more,’ said Charley; ‘I am quite satisfied.’

‘Do I understand you to say you consider my efforts sufficient?’

‘Quite,’ said Charley.

‘Very good, my dear sir,’ said Mr. Whittrick; ‘then all I can say is, that it has been a most satisfactory interview for both parties; only recollect that you may want me again, and that you have paid me so liberally, that there is a large balance in your favour, which I am ready to devote to you at a moment’s notice.’

‘You would rather not inform me how you obtained that information, I presume?’ said Charley, turning on the threshold, to display to the high-priest of private inquiry a thoroughly mystified countenance.

‘Quite out of the question,’ said Mr.

Whittrick, smiling; and the next minute Charley was bowed out, to descend the stairs, taking no heed of the scowls of those who had been kept waiting during the long interview.

‘Where to next, sir?’ said a voice; and Charley started to find that the cabman, who had not been paid, was naturally enough waiting the return of his fare.

‘19 Crescent Villas, Regent’s-park,’ said Charley abstractedly; but the next moment he had altered his mind, and changed his order for Long’s Hotel, where he arrived elate, but confused, so utterly incomprehensible seemed the power of the private inquirer.

Light came through at last, and seemed to cut through his brain with a sharp pang. It was all plain enough now: another had been seeking information, even as he had sought it, and the news he had obtained

was only second-hand. But who had been beforehand with him, while he had been wasting time with his own ineffectual unassisted efforts?

There was no need for much consideration. The reply to his question was quick enough in arriving, burdened too with bitterness: and the answer was—

‘Max Bray!’

CHAPTER XIX.

AT CRESCENT VILLAS.

KEEPING to her determination, Ella wrote cheerfully to Mrs. Brandon, making the best of everything, and then devoted herself energetically to the task of trying to shape the rugged children in her charge. The days glided by, and ever striving to be hopeful she toiled on, driving away all thoughts of the past, and rejoicing in her freedom from persecution.

But her rejoicings were but short-lived; for one day, upon returning from a walk, there, once more, was Max Bray to meet her, and salute her with all the familiarity of an old acquaintance, just in front of the windows of Mrs. St. Clair Marter's house,

and at a time, too, when that lady herself was gazing from a window.

Ella crimsoned with vexation, and escaping as quickly as possible, she entered the house, to learn from Thomas that there had been 'a gent to see her; but as she was out, missus had seen him instead.'

How was it all to end? she asked herself, as, angry now, she hurried to her room, expecting momentarily a summons to the presence of Mrs. Marter.

But it did not come; and it was with beating heart that she descended to the drawing-room in the evening. Had there come a message soon after she returned, it would have been when, driven as it were to bay, she would have had spirit to defend herself; but now she was tremulous and weak, and as she took her place and began to read, her voice shook so that she was afraid it would attract attention.

‘By the way, Miss Bedford—’ said Mrs. Marter suddenly.

It was coming, then, at last, and in an instant Ella saw herself once more driven to seek a home—saw herself harried and persecuted at situation after situation ; and it was with a faint giddy sensation, making everything look confused and indistinct, that she listened to Mrs. Marter’s words, and tried to find words to reply.

‘By the way, Miss Bedford, as you are aware, a gentleman called this afternoon while you were absent with the young ladies. I have always said that I would never encourage anything of the kind ; but when a gentleman of good family comes to me, and in a proper way, I must say that I feel disposed to be lenient. I must say, though, that I consider you a very fortunate girl ; and [though this has come upon me very suddenly, yet I shall not be harsh ;

and if your conduct continues satisfactory, I shall give you every encouragement.'

Ella was astounded: the words were so thoroughly opposed to those she had expected, that for a few moments she could not speak, and her silence was immediately interpreted to mean modest confusion.

'I did know some branches of the Bray family at one time,' continued Mrs. Marter, 'and Mr. Maximilian puts me very much in mind of them. I must say that I very greatly approve of your choice, for he is a most gentlemanly man: there is so much the tone of one accustomed to good society. Really I cannot help congratulating you.'

'Indeed, indeed, madam—' exclaimed Ella earnestly.

'Hush, child, hush. I will not hear a word. I have said all that need be said upon the subject, except that I have given

Mr. Maximilian Bray my full consent to his calling here as frequently as he likes.'

Again Ella essayed to speak, but only to be checked, and almost ordered to go on with her reading, which was kept up for two hours, till Mrs. Marter and her lord were both comfortably asleep, when the reader was left alone with her thoughts.

Two days passed, and then she was summoned to the drawing-room to meet Mr. Maximilian Bray. In the interim she had twice approached the subject—the first time to be checked good-humouredly, the second time to be told that her conduct was bold and forward, words which effectually sealed her lips for the future ; while it was with a feeling of hot indignation that she descended to the drawing-room, to find Mrs. Marter laughing at some remark just made by the exquisite, who rose on Ella's entrance to salute her in a quiet, respectful, friendly way,

that she told herself it would be folly to resent. Then, chattering quietly, more to Mrs. Marter than herself, his behaviour was sufficient to make Mrs. Marter at his departure praise him earnestly, but at the same time refuse to hear a word in return.

What did it mean? Was Mrs. Marter siding with him? What, then, should she do? It seemed nothing so long as such visits as those were paid.

From twice in a week Max's visits grew to three, and soon to one a day; but always towards her there was a quiet gentlemanly reserve, and once, and once only, when they were left alone for a minute, did Max say words that gave her cause for thought.

'Nice woman, Mrs. Marter,' said Max quietly, 'only she keeps twitting me with my frequent visits. She will have they are for an end, while really, Miss Bedford, my sole end now is a little friendly feeling. O,

here she comes back. Can't you give us a little music? I do find it so dull here in town!—Just asking Miss Bedford to give us a little music, Mrs. Marter,' said Max, raising his voice as that lady reëntered the room.

'O, yes, of course,' said Mrs. Marter; and Ella was obliged to go to the piano.

She could not help wondering at times whether Charley Vining had ever tried to find out her address, a strange thrill passing through her frame at the thought; but the next moment she had crushed that thought out, and was sternly occupied over some task in connection with her duties.

At one time she thought of telling Mrs. Brandon of Max's visits, but as they seemed to grow daily more and more addressed to the lady of the house, there seemed to be no necessity; for there were days when hardly half-a-dozen words passed between

her and Max during a visit, and she had not worldly wisdom enough to see that Max Bray was awaiting the time when it would suit him best to make his spring.

CHAPTER XX.

A RIVAL ENCOUNTER.

THE day following his visit to Branksome-street, Charley made his way to Crescent Villas, and sent up his card to Mrs. Marter.

The footman returned at the end of a few minutes to say that Mrs. Marter was not at home.

Was Miss Bedford at home?

Thomas did not know, but he would go and see; which he did, to return shaking his head.

Charley said he would call again, which he did, with precisely the same result.

Nothing daunted, he repeated his calls, till it was perfectly evident that neither Mrs. Marter nor Ella would see him; and

he was coming away knit of brow one day, when he started with anger on seeing a cab trundle by with Max Bray as its occupant.

It was most repugnant to his feelings to play the spy ; but in despite of himself he followed the cab till he saw it stop at Crescent Villas, and Max spring out, run up the steps and ring, to be the next minute admitted, the cab being driven off.

One hour, two hours, three hours, did Charley Vining wait, when, it being evident that Max was dining there, he returned to his hotel ; and then, in a state of mental anguish that he could not control, he wrote a long and earnest letter to Ella, imploring her to see him, telling of his sufferings, and of how he had been refused entrance again and again.

He waited three days and there was no response, when he wrote again—a bitter angry letter this time, to have it returned

to him unopened by the next post, the direction, he felt sure, being in Max Bray's handwriting.

Maddened now by the jealous feelings that assailed him, he watched the house till he saw that Max Bray was a constant visitor. Then came a night when a brougham was at the door, and he saw Max hand down two ladies, one of whom was Ella. Then taking his place, the door of the brougham was closed, and it was driven off.

'Follow that fly,' said Charley to a cabman; and the man drew up at last by the Piazza in the Haymarket, and Charley leaped out just in time to see Max disappearing in the stall-entrance of Her Majesty's Theatre, Mrs. Marter upon one arm, Ella upon the other.

Dressed as he was, it was with some difficulty that Charley secured a place where he could, unobserved, watch the movements of

the party. Max's quiet gentlemanly attentions were directed to both alike, the passing of the book of the words, the seeking places, and lastly the replacing of the opera-cloak upon Ella's gracefully rounded shoulders.

They passed close to him where he stood muffled up and with flashing eyes, Ella's cloak brushing his coat on the way to the brougham; and then they were driven off.

He wrote again after a sleepless night, telling of what he had seen, and imploring Ella to send him if but a line to assure him that his suspicions were false. 'I have fought against them till it seems to me that it would require more than human strength,' he said naïvely, 'while now I feel almost driven to believe.'

The same result: the letter returned unopened, and redirected in a hand that he was certain was Max Bray's.

Furious now with rage, he took a cab

and drove to Max's lodgings in Bury-street, St. James's, to arrive in time to see two ladies descend the steps—one of whom was Ella—Max handing them into a waiting brougham, and kissing his hand as they were driven off.

‘Ah, Charley Vining, how do?’ he exclaimed, smiling pleasantly as he encountered the fierce angry face at his side. ‘Bai Jove, what a stranger you are! Haven't set eyes on you for months.’

‘I want a few words with you, Max,’ said Charley harshly.

‘Many as you like. Bai Jove, I don't care how much any one talks to me, so long as they don't want me to talk to them! Come upstairs.’

Charley followed him into his sybaritish bachelor rooms, where Max threw himself on a couch.

‘Cigar or pipe, Vining—which will you

have? I've some capital St. Julien, and a decent bottle or two of hock. Which shall it be? Bai Jove, man, what's the matter? Anything upset you?

'Max Bray,' said Charley, striding up to the sofa and towering over its occupant, 'I want to know who those ladies were that you handed into that brougham.'

'Bai Jove, mai dear fellow, what an uncouth kind of catechism! And suppose I don't choose to tell you?'

'Curse you! I'll wring it out of you!' cried Charley fiercely.

'No, bai Jove, you won't do anything of the kind,' said Max coolly. 'Gentlemen don't act like confounded cads. Why, man alive, I did not say I would not tell you. I'm open as the day. Do you want to know?'

Charley made an impatient gesture.

'Well, bai Jove, if you must know, one

is a friend of mine, Mrs. Marter, of Regent's-park.'

'And the other?' said Charley hoarsely.

'The other,' said Max, quietly lighting a cigar, 'is another lady friend of mine—one Miss Bedford.'

Max must have seen those clutching fingers that moved as if about to seize him by the throat; but he did not shrink, he did not waver for an instant, but lit his cigar unmoved, and then sank luxuriously back upon the couch to smoke and stare nonchalantly in his visitor's face.

That cool matter-of-fact way staggered and disarmed Charley. Had he seen the slightest sign of cowardice, he would have seized Max, and shaken him savagely; but that cool insolence seemed to the stricken man to tell of success and safety of position—the sense of being able to deal pityingly with an unfortunate rival; and it

was in altered tones that Charley tore a letter from his breast, and threw it upon the table.

‘Who redirected that letter?’ he exclaimed.

Max smoked for a few moments in thoughtful silence, then, casting off all affectation, he said quietly :

‘Would it not be better to change the subject, Vining? It is not every horse that wins. The favourite is a dangerous nag to place your money on, as you must know. We are old friends, Vining, and I am sorry to run counter to you. Say what you will, I shall not quarrel.’

‘Who redirected that letter?’ repeated Charley, again more fiercely.

‘Bai Jove, Vining, this is going too far!’ said Max in injured tones. ‘You have no right to come to a gentleman and ask him such questions.’

‘Who redirected that letter?’ Charley cried for the third time.

‘Well there, then, if you will have it—I did,’ said Max quietly.

‘And any others?’

‘Yes, all of them.’

‘And by whose authority?’

‘Bai Jove, it’s too bad!’ exclaimed Max—‘I will not say another word. I will not be cross-examined like this. You’ve made misery enough, Vining, bai Jove, you have! You throw over poor Laura in the most heartless way; you come between me and some one; and now, when matters are once more running smoothly, you come here more like a mad bull than anything. I don’t care; it’s the truth, and you can’t deny it!’

The moment was critical again; for blind with rage, Charley Vining seized Max by the throat, and placed his knee upon his

chest as he lay back on the couch; but again the latter was equal to the position, and he did not attempt to free himself.

‘Don’t be a brute, Vining!’ he said quietly. ‘I’m not afraid of you; but you have double my strength.’

Charley started back as he was met by those cool collected words, and catching up his letter, he tore from the place, leaving Max with a quiet contented smile upon his face, smoking till he had finished his cigar, when he threw away the end, rose, re-arranged his slightly disordered shirt-front, and rang for a cab, being driven to Austin’s Ticket-Office, where he secured seats for a concert to be held that night at St. James’s Hall; returned, made a most elaborate toilet, and then, not knowing, but careless, whether or not he was watched, he made his way to Crescent Villas, dined there, and that same evening Charley Vining saw him

seated beside Ella Bedford in the reserved seats at the great hall, while, pale and careworn in the balcony, the young man again and again saw Ella smile at something her companion uttered.

‘I’ll not give up yet,’ said Charley hoarsely. ‘I made a vow, and I’ll keep to it!’

CHAPTER XXI.

(—?—).

‘La Donna e Mobile,’ hummed Charley again and again, as he sat in the smoking-room of his hotel. He had paid no heed to the concert, his eyes being fixed all the while upon Max and his two companions; but that air had been sung by one of the great artistes, and words and music had forced themselves upon him so that they seemed for hours after to be ringing in his ears.

‘La Donna e Mobile.’ Yes, it was all plain enough, and it was nothing new. He had made an impression at first, and she had seemed to love him—perhaps, after her fashion, had loved him—but woman’s love,

he said, required feeding. The fuel absent, the flame must become extinct.

He laughed bitterly, and a waiter came up.

‘Did you ask for something, sir?’

‘No!’ roared Charley savagely; and the man shrunk away.

‘I’ll pester her no more,’ he said; ‘let things take their course. I’ll go down home and see the poor old gentleman to-morrow. I may just as well, as hang about here torturing myself over a slow fire. I wonder how the mare looks. A good run or two would do me no end of good. I’ll pack up and run down to-morrow.’

Then he laughed bitterly, for he knew that he was playing at self-deceit; he felt that he could not stir from London—that he was, as it were, fixed, and without a desire to leave the spot where he could feel that she was near.

‘No,’ he said, after a while; ‘I’ll not give up yet. I made a vow, and I’ll keep it. She is not his yet. She may have been—she must have been—deceived. I have been condemned. No; she would not listen. I don’t know—there, I think I’m half mad!’

Just then his hand came in contact with a couple of letters which had been awaiting him on his return, and which one of the waiters had handed to him, to be thrust unnoticed into his pocket.

‘Bills,’ said the waiter, to one of his fellows. ‘How nice to be tradesman to those young swells! I s’pose some of them must pay, some time or other, or else people couldn’t live.’

‘O yes,’ said the other; ‘some of them pay, and those who will pay, have to pay for those who won’t.’

‘Through the nose,’ said number one with a wink.

‘To be sure,’ said his confrère; and then they laughed at one another, and winked again.

But the waiter was wrong: those were not bills; one being a long and affectionate letter from Sir Philip Vining, telling Charley that he would be in town the next day, and asking if it would be convenient for his son to meet him at the station. The other was from Laura Bray, saying that they had heard from Sir Philip that he would be in town the next day, and asking that he and Charley would dine in Harley-street, where was the Brays’ town house, on the next day but one.

The above was all formal, and written at mamma’s command, but Laura had added a postscript, asking that Charley would come for the sake of the old times when they were friends. Max would be away, and the party very small.

Then came a quiet reminder of the encounter, and a word to say that the writer had looked out day by day, in the expectation of receiving a call, while poor Nelly was *au désespoir*.

Charley smiled grimly as he read the letter over, and then carelessly thrust it back into the envelope with the bold address which waiter number one had kindly taken for a tradesman's hand.

'Take the good the gods provide one,' said Charley with a bitter laugh, as he smoked furiously, and tossed down glass after glass of claret to allay the fevered rush of thought through his brain.

'I'll go,' he said at last, 'and see little Nell. Poor little wiry weedy Nell!—what a genuine, free-hearted, jolly little lass it is! But there, if I do, she'll only make some reference to the past.'

Charley Vining's thoughts came so fast

that night, that they jostled and stumbled over one another in the most confused way imaginable, till once more, shining out like a star amidst the surrounding darkness, the light of Ella's face seemed to slowly rise, and he sat there thinking of her till the waiters yawned with misery because he did not retire.

But he went at last ; and Ella's name was on his lips as he fell off into a heavy weary sleep, as it was the first word he uttered when waking.

The next day Sir Philip was in town, surprised and shocked to see the alteration in his son's face ; for Charley looked haggard and worn, and as if he had been engaged in a long career of dissipation. He laughed, though, when Sir Philip reverted to it, and seemed most assiduous in his endeavours to promote the old man's comfort.

‘ About this dinner at the Brays’, Char-

ley: I should like to go,' Sir Philip said—
'that is, if you will go with me.'

'Do you particularly wish it, sir?' said Charley.

'It would give me much pleasure, if you have no other engagement.'

'Engagement!' said Charley, with a bitter laugh that shocked Sir Philip. 'No, father, I have no engagements. I'll go.'

'But, my dear boy, what have you been doing with yourself?—how do you pass your time?'

'Preparing myself for a private lunatic asylum, father,' said Charley, with a cynical laugh; and the old man felt a swelling in his throat as he thought of the alteration that had taken place since the morning of the memorable conversation in the library.

There was a something in Charley's looks that troubled Sir Philip more than he cared to intimate: had the young man

sternly refused to visit the Brays, or to accede to his wishes in any way, he would not have been surprised; but his strange looks, his bitter words, and ready acquiescence alarmed Sir Philip; and when, an hour after, Charley left the room, the old gentleman looked anxiously for his return, till, unable to bear the suspense any longer, he rang and summoned a waiter.

‘Has my son gone out?’ he asked.

‘Think not, Sir Philip. I’ll make inquiry.’

Five anxious minutes passed, and then the man returned.

‘No, Sir Philip, he went up to his bedroom.’

Pale and trembling, Sir Philip rose and hurried upstairs. He knew that Charley had had some more than usually bitter reverse, and a horrible dread had invaded the troubled father’s breast, so that when

he reached his son's room door, he feared to summon him ; but at last he knocked, and waited for a few moments before he struck again upon the panels, this time more forcibly.

There was no reply.

CHAPTER XXII.

ACCIDENT OR DESIGN?

SIR PHILIP VINING tried the door again and again, shaking it loudly, and repeating his son's name; but there was no reply.

What should he do—summon assistance and have the room broken open? He dreaded calling for aid, to bring up the curious to gaze upon his anguish, and perhaps upon—

He seemed to check his thoughts there by a tremendous effort, and turning round, he gazed in both directions along the well-lit thickly-carpeted corridor.

There was no one in sight, neither could he hear a sound.

Then he tried to look through the key-

hole of the door, but something arrested his vision. He knocked and called again and again, but there was not even the sound of breathing to be detected on the other side; and at last, roused to frenzy, Sir Philip turned the handle, and then dashed his shoulder with all his might against the panelling.

He was not strong, but the sudden sharp shock made the little bolt by which the door was secured give way, when, rushing in, Sir Philip hastily closed the door behind him, anxious even now to hide from the public eye any blur that might have fallen upon the Vinings' name.

There was a small globe lamp burning upon the table, but the room seemed empty, and the bed was unpressed; but on hurrying round to the foot, there on a couch lay Charley, his coat and vest thrown off, his collar and neckband unfastened, and his

pale handsome face turned towards the light. His lips were just parted, and his leaden-hued eyelids barely closed; but upon Sir Philip throwing himself on his knees by the figure of his son, he could just detect a faint breathing, and upon hastily drawing his watch and holding it near his lips, the bright gold back was slightly dimmed.

‘O, that it should have come to this!’ groaned Sir Philip; and raising his clenched hand, for a moment it was as though he were about to call down Heaven’s bitterest curse upon the head of the gentle girl to whom he attributed all this pain and suffering. But as he did so, his hand fell again to his side, and the recollection of the fair, soft, pleading face he had last looked upon, with its gentle eyes and pale cheeks, and then the scene of her fainting when he tottered back to kiss her glossy

hair—all came back most vividly, and he groaned aloud.

And then he seemed to awaken to the necessity for instant action, and running to the bell, he tore at it furiously.

But there was pride still busy in the old man's brain, in spite of the shock: the world must not know what was wrong; and hastily looking round, he saw upon the dressing-table, lying in company with the young man's watch, with the thick gold chain carelessly thrown around it, a small graduated bottle—Time and Eternity, so it seemed, side by side.

Sir Philip was not surprised. He seemed to know intuitively what was coming. He had suspected it when downstairs, but in a more horrible manner; and as soon as he had thrust the bottle into his pocket, he shudderingly closed and locked the dressing-case upon the table, where, glit-

tering and bright, lay amongst velvet several unused keen-bladed means of avoiding the pains and suffering of this world.

The next minute there was a knock at the bedroom-door, and the chamber-maid appeared.

‘Quick!’ exclaimed Sir Philip—‘the nearest doctor directly. My son is dangerously ill!’

The woman hurried out, but returned directly.

‘I have sent, sir. But can I do anything? Has he taken too much?’

‘Too much! Too much what?’ cried Sir Philip angrily, resenting the remark.

‘What do you mean, woman?’

‘He has been taking it now for above a fortnight, sir,’ said the maid. ‘Poor gentleman! he’s in trouble, I think, and takes it to quiet himself.’

‘What?’ cried Sir Philip, but this time with less anger in his tones.

‘Morphy, I think it’s called, sir—a sort of spirits of laudanum; and I suppose it’s awful strong. Surely, poor gentleman, he ain’t over-done it!’

‘Are you sure that he has been in the habit of taking it?’ said Sir Philip.

‘O, yes, sir. I’ve often seen the bottle on the dressing-table. “Morphy: to be used with great care,” it said on the label. I don’t fancy he’s so bad as you think, sir.’

Sir Philip, still trembling with anxiety, knelt by his son’s couch, to be somewhat reassured by a deep sigh which the young man now drew; and five minutes after, the doctor came in, black, smooth, and silent—a very owl amongst men—bowed to Sir Philip, and then looked at his patient.

‘How long has he been like this?’

‘I found him so a quarter — half an hour since,’ said Sir Philip. ‘He had left me an hour before that.’

‘Humph!’ said the doctor. ‘Any reason for thinking he would commit suicide?’

‘H’m—no!’ said Sir Philip, hesitating; ‘but he has, I fear, been suffering a great deal of mental pain.’

‘Any bottle or packet about?’ said the doctor—‘bottle, I should say. No strong odour existent; but it seems like a narcotic poison at work.’

‘I found this,’ said Sir Philip, producing the little flask he had taken from the table.

‘To be sure—exactly—graduated too! My dear sir, I don’t think there is any cause for alarm. He has evidently taken a strong dose; but, you see, here are ample instructions, and the bottle is nearly empty.’

‘But he may have taken all that,’ said Sir Philip anxiously.

‘My dear sir,’ said the doctor, ‘if he had taken one-eighth part, he would not be lying as you now see him. Depend upon it, that after a few hours he will wake calm and composed, when, if you are, as I suppose from the likeness,’—here the doctor bowed,—‘his father, a little quiet advice would not be out of place. It is a bad sign for a fine young man like this to be resorting to such subtle agencies to procure rest. Depend upon it, his brain is in a sad state. I should advise change.’

‘But do you not think that you had better wait?’ said Sir Philip anxiously.

‘I would do so with pleasure,’ said the doctor; ‘but really, my dear sir, there is not the slightest necessity, and, besides, I am within easy call.’

The doctor departed softly, as he had arrived; and taking his seat by the couch, Sir Philip watched hour after hour, forget-

ful of his own fatigue, till towards morning, when Charley turned, sighed deeply, and then sat up to gaze anxiously in his father's face.

‘You here, dad?’ he said lightly.

‘My dear boy—at last!’ cried Sir Philip. ‘You have alarmed me terribly! Why do you take that?’ And he pointed to the bottle.

‘To keep myself sane, father,’ said Charley sadly—‘because I have lain here night after night waiting for the sleep that would not come. I’ve smoked; I’ve drunk heavily; I’ve walked and ridden till so tired I could hardly stand; and then I’ve lain here through the long dreary nights, till I felt that I should lose my head altogether.’

The old gentleman rose and began to pace the room.

‘But there,’ cried Charley cheerfully, ‘I’ve kept you up too. So now go to

your room, and I'll turn over a new leaf, dad. Look here!

As he spoke, he took up the little bottle from where it had been placed by the doctor, and threw it sharply into the grate, where it was smashed to atoms.

'There, I'll be a coward no longer, sir! I'm going to begin a clean page of the book to-morrow. No more blots and random writing, but all ruled fair and straight. There, good-night, or, rather, good-morning! Breakfast at ten, mind!'

Sir Philip left the room, and Charley plunged his face into a basin of cold water before sitting down quietly to think; and as he thought, he turned over and over again his intentions for the future.

It did seem now certain that Max Bray had supplanted him—there could be hardly a doubt of it, but still there was that shade; and till he was certain he would still hold

in his heart. He told himself that he was valuing it too very, and he had done all that man could do; but still he must have the final certainty before he would think for ever in his breast the thought that would not cease to urge to do something towards alleviating his suffering.

Then he thought of Max Bray, and his brow lowered as he recalled his words, till those floated before his mind respecting Laura, and his treatment of her.

It was absurd, certainly, but the whole family must have supposed that he had intended to ask her hand. But he had never said word of love to her. What, though, of the lady? There was no doubt that Laura did love him, poor girl! perhaps very earnestly; and if so, he was sorry for her; for it was not his wish to give her pain.

Then once more he thought of Ella.

Would she have accepted him, he would have set the world at defiance; but no—under the guise of a modest retirement, she had rejected him to accept Max Bray.

But was it so? No, *no*, no! He would not believe it. He would hold to his faith in her till the last came, and then he knew that he should be a changed man.

Once more he asked himself whether he had done all that man could do; and his heart honestly replied that he had—everything.

‘Then my policy now is, to wait and see,’ said Charley aloud, and with a bitterness in his tones that told how what he had seen rankled in his breast. Then, throwing himself on his bed, he said once more aloud, ‘It can’t be long now before I have some proof, and after that—’

He did not finish his sentence—he could not; for ‘after that’ seemed to him to be

such a weary blank, that he almost wondered whether he would be able to live through it all. And there he lay, sleepless now, awaiting the convincing proof; a proof that was to come sooner even than he anticipated.

CHAPTER XXIII.

NELLY'S CONFIDENCE.

THE Brays' mansion in Harley-street, and as grand a dinner as had been in the long, gaunt, dreary place for months past. Sir Philip and Charley had called the morning before, and Nelly had planted herself by Charley's side, to keep there the whole time. Not that Laura seemed to mind; for she was gentle, slightly constrained, but there was a saddened suffering look in her countenance which lighted up whenever Charley said a few words.

For some reason she kept glancing at him with a troubled air—perhaps from some dread in connection with her plain avowals; but Charley was the quiet gentleman in every word and look; and before

they left, all seemed to be quite at ease, so that the young man was almost angry with himself for feeling so quiet and happy during the half-hour or so the visit had lasted, besides which he had been merrily laughing two or three times with Nelly.

‘Do, do, please!’ Nelly had whispered; and those whispers had made Laura’s breast heave as she interpreted them to relate to Ella Bedford, whose name, however, had not been mentioned.

‘I daren’t,’ said Charley laughingly, in answer to Nelly’s appeal.

‘O do—*do*—do!’ whispered Nelly **again**.
‘You owe me ever so much for being your friend.’

Charley’s face darkened.

‘Please I didn’t mean to hurt you,’
Nelly gently; ‘don’t’
for she had so
tenance.

'I'm not angry, my child,' he said, smiling again.

'That's right!' whispered Nelly. 'I do love to see you laugh; it makes you look so handsome. I say, Charley, I do wish you had been my brother! But now, I say, do declare you won't come unless they let me dine with you all. I am so sick of the schoolroom.'

Poor Nelly! Inadvertently she kept touching chords that thrilled in Charley Vining's breast; but he beat back the feelings, and laughingly said aloud that he thought he should not be able to come.

'O, really,' shrieked Mrs. Bray, 'I shall be so disappointed!'

Laura looked pained, but she did not direct her eyes Vining-ward.

'I find that a particular old friend of mine is not coming to dinner,' said Charley, 'and therefore I shall decline.'

‘O, really, my dear Vining,’ said Mr. Bray, ceasing to warm the tails of his coat, ‘don’t say so; give us his name, and we’ll invite him at once.’

‘Tain’t a him at all,’ cried the ungrammatical one, jumping up, laughing, and clapping her hands; ‘it’s a her, and it’s me; so there now—you must have me to dinner, after all. And why not, I should like to know. I’m only an inch shorter than pa.’

So Nelly dined with them that day, and Charley took her down, and sat between her and Laura, ‘behaving more jolly than ever he did before,’ so Nelly vowed; while Laura could not but own to the quiet, staid, gentlemanly tact with which he avoided all the past; and trembling and hopeful, she watched him unseen the whole evening.

He did not, neither did she, seek a *tête-à-tête*; but at the first opportunity Nelly dragged him aside in one of the drawing-

rooms, under the pretence of showing him pictures; and though Laura saw all, she did not stir.

'That's pretty, ain't it?' said Nelly. 'I sketched that.' Then in a low voice, 'You like me, Charley, don't you?'

'Yes, very much, my child,' said Charley quietly. 'Do you want me to do something for you?'

'No,' said Nelly; 'I only want to say something.'

'Go on, then.'

'You will not be cross?'

'No.'

'Are you sure?'

'Yes, yes, my child,' said Charley sadly.

'It's about that I wanted to talk to you,' said Nelly. 'I don't like seeing you so low and dumpy when you ought to be jolly and happy. You know you are miser-

able about some one that I got to love very—very much.'

Charley was silent ; but his breath came thick and fast.

'And do you know, I'm sure that if she had been left alone she would have been all that's wise and good and dear? May I go on?'

'Yes,' said Charley, with quite a hiss.

'I thought you would like me to say anything, when you wouldn't hear it from any one else. Do you know, Charley, you mustn't be miserable about Miss B— any more? and if I wasn't going to have Hugh Lingon when I get big—I mean old enough—I should ask you to let me love you, and try and comfort you, and make you happy. I do love you very much now, you know, but I mean the other way.'

She was silent for a few moments, while he went on turning over the pictures.

‘Charley,’ she then said earnestly, ‘I don’t think she has done right; but whether she’s been persuaded, or somebody’s told stories about you, Max goes to see her very often—nearly every day now—and she writes to him lots of letters. O Charley, dear Charley!’ she half sobbed, ‘what have I done? Pray!—please don’t look like that! I thought telling you would make you leave off looking miserable, and ready to be happy again when you knew you couldn’t have her. But pray—pray don’t look like that!’

For the young man’s ghastly face had frightened her, as he stood gazing full in her eyes, crushing the while one of the drawings in his hand.

‘How do you know that?’ he whispered hoarsely.

‘I heard Max tell Laury; and one day, when I went with her to his rooms, there

was a whole heap of little narrow envelopes directed to him, and they were all in her handwriting. But please try and not fret, or I shall be so—so unhappy.'

Charley drew a deep long breath, and for the space of a good minute he stood there supporting himself by, and gazing blankly down at, the table, for a sharp pang had shot through him, and he felt giddy; but the next minute it passed off, as he muttered to himself:

'Not yet, not yet. I must have farther proof!'

Then, by an effort, he recovered himself, and leading Nelly to the piano, he sat by her while she sang. A few minutes after, he was by Laura's side, talking to her quietly and gently, as he would have talked to any other lady.

And she knew the while what had passed in the farther drawing-room—knew as well

as if she had listened; for she knew that Nelly had heard her brother's words, and, in spite of Nelly's quickness, Laura had seen her looking at the letters that were in Ella's handwriting.

Laura's breast heaved as Charley sat beside her, and again she trembled, and her heart smote her as she saw how deeply that wound had been cut. But though she pitied, she was hopeful; for she said to herself, 'The day must come when Max's words will be true, and he will run to me for solace. The day must come! But when?'

CHAPTER XXIV.

MR. WHITTRICK AGAIN.

DURING the rest of the evening at the Brays' party Charley was lively and chatty. By an effort he seemed to have cast aside the feelings that oppressed him; and as they went back to the Bond-street hotel, Sir Philip felt quite hopeful, as it seemed to him that his son was indeed going to turn over the fresh leaf.

The next day Charley was off betimes to Branksome-street, where he was fortunate in getting an immediate interview with the great Mr. Whittrick.

'You received my letter, posted two days since?' asked Charley.

'Same evening, sir,' said Mr. Whittrick.

‘You grant, I suppose, that it is as I said—Mr. Maximilian Bray had been here before me?’

‘My dear sir,’ said Mr. Whittrick, with a smile, ‘when a gentleman pays me certain fees for certain services, he has bought those services—they are his private property, and I have done with them—that is all finished. Do you understand? This is a private-inquiry office, and every client’s business is private. What I might divulge upon that pleasant old institution the rack, I can’t say—that being enough to make any man speak; but I believe I should do as many another man did.’

‘What was that?’ said Charley, smiling.

‘Tell any lie the inquisitors wished,’ said Mr. Whittrick. ‘But as we have no rack nowadays, only moral thumbscrews, why, we are not forced to speak at all. No, sir;

if there is such a person as Mr. Maximilian Bray, or Cray, or Dray, or whatever his name is, and he came here on business, if we could, we did his business—we can't always, you know—and there was an end of it; but if you want me to private inquire him, I'll do it, just the same as if he came here and wanted me to private inquire you, I should do it—both together if it was necessary—though I don't think I should say anything about visits here,' he said, with a slight twinkle of one of his dark eyes. 'So now, my dear sir, what's it to be? Shall we report to you upon this gentleman's proceedings? Let me see,' he said, referring to the letter, 'Bury-street, St. James's, isn't it? Yes, quite right. Well, sir?'

'Yes,' said Charley; 'and set about it at once.'

'How often, and how much, would you like to know?'

‘How often!’ cried Charley fiercely. ‘Every day—every hour if it is necessary. Write, send, telegraph to me. I want to know his every act and deed, till I tell you to leave off, if you can do it.’

‘I think we can manage it, sir,’ said Mr. Whittrick, with a quiet smile. ‘Not quite so quickly as we did the last, though.’

‘Then set about it at once,’ said Charley.

‘It will be rather expensive work, sir,’ said Mr. Whittrick quietly.

Charley drew a blank cheque, signed by Sir Philip, from his pocket-book.

‘What shall I fill this up for, Mr. Whittrick?’ said Charley.

‘O, really, Mr. Vining, I did not mean that,’ said Mr. Whittrick. ‘With some clients, of course, we make sure of the money before acting; but I am in your debt still. What I meant was, are you disposed to go to the expense of men, day

after day, the whole of their time on your business ?’

‘Yes, certainly,’ said Charley, taking pen and ink. ‘Shall I fill this up for a hundred pounds ?’

‘No,’ said Mr. Whittrick quietly : ‘fifty will do for the present. But stay—let me see : make it to bearer, sir—Mr. Smith or bearer ; it might not be pleasant to Sir Philip Vining to have it known at his banker’s that I am transacting family business. You see, sir, mine’s a very well-known name, and one that has been blown upon a good deal, and some people are rather fastidious about it. And to tell the truth, sir, I really am agent sometimes in rather unpleasant matters. Thank you—that will do, sir. You shall have some information to-night, and of course, under these circumstances, a great deal may seem very trivial ; but you must not mind that,

for sometimes very trivial acts turn out to be the most important in the end, while again noisy matters turn out empty bangs. I think we understand one another so far; but would you like a few attentions to be paid to the lady?’

‘What?’ said Charley abruptly.

‘Would you like one of my agents to give an eye to No. 19 Crescent Villas, Regent’s-park, Mr. Vining?’

‘No,’ said Charley sternly; ‘certainly not!’

‘Very good, sir,’ said Mr. Whittrick, in his quiet way. ‘Have you any farther commands?’

‘No,’ said Charley, taking the hint, and rising; and the next minute he was face to face with Sir Philip Vining in the street.

For a few moments father and son stood quite taken aback at the suddenness of the

encounter ; but Charley was the first to recover from his surprise.

‘There is only one house here, sir, that you would visit,’ he said quietly ; ‘and there is no necessity. You were going to Whit-trick’s?’

Sir Philip bent his head.

‘Let us go back to the hotel,’ said Charley ; and without a word they entered the cab Sir Philip had in waiting, and were driven back to Bond-street.

Not a word was spoken during the backward journey ; but as soon as they were alone in their private room, Charley placed a chair for his father, and then seated himself opposite to him.

‘You were going to have me watched, father,’ he said calmly.

‘My dear boy—my dear boy, it is for your own sake, and you drive me to it!’ exclaimed Sir Philip.

‘There is no need, father,’ said Charley. ‘We will have no more estrangement. You have wronged me cruelly to gratify your pride, but — There,’ he exclaimed hastily, ‘I said there was no need for my being watched. I will be open with you as the day: ask me anything you will, and I will answer you freely. To begin with: I have been there this morning for the purpose of having Max Bray watched: one proof—only one more proof, father—of what I am seeking for, and your wishes will be accomplished—there will be no fear of the Vings’ escutcheon being lowered. One thing more,’ he said hoarsely, and forcing his words from his lips, ‘and I have done; and we will return to Blandfield, where you shall help me to begin life again, father.’

‘My dear Charley,’ groaned the old man, ‘if I could but see you happy!’

The young man turned upon him a wistful mournful look before speaking.

‘Let the past be now!’ he said sternly. ‘It cannot be altered. Only leave me free for the present—don’t hamper me in any way.’

‘But, Charley—’

The old gentleman-whispered a few words in his son’s ear.

‘No,’ said Charley, shaking his head; ‘there will be none of that. If I were to knock Max Bray down,’ he said, with scornful contempt, ‘he would send for a policeman. My dear father, you are thinking of your own days: men do not fight duels now in England. Let us go out now—this place seems to stifle me. But don’t be alarmed, sir; if I am beaten in the race, whether it be by fair running or a foul, I shall give up. I know that I have run the course in a manly straightforward manner,

according to my own convictions, and as, father, I felt that I must. But the running is nearly over, sir, and I shall give you little more pain.'

'Charley, my dear boy—' began Sir Philip.

'Hush, father!' said Charley, checking him. 'The time has nearly come for burying the past. Let us hope that some day the grass may grow green and pleasant-looking over its grave. At present, I see nothing but a black yawning pit — one which I shrink from approaching.'

CHAPTER XXV.

COMING ROUND.

‘FROM the Brays, Charley?’ said Sir Philip, as they sat over their breakfast at Long’s about a month after the meeting in Branksome-street.

‘Yes,’ said Charley. ‘Mr. Bray has taken a private box at Her Majesty’s for to-night, and will we have an early dinner with them and go?’

‘My dear boy, I trust you will accept the invitation.’

‘Do you wish me to, father?’ said Charley.

‘Yes, certainly,’ cried Sir Philip; ‘but not in that dreadfully resigned spirit.’

‘All right, sir!’ said Charley, with a smile that he tried to make cheerful; and

tossing the letter carelessly aside, he went on with his breakfast.

‘You will write an answer, and send it by a commissionaire, of course?’

‘No,’ said Charley. ‘I’ll ride up there before lunch, and tell them. I want to see if my little maid Nelly has come back yet: she seems to make the Brays’ place more bearable when one goes there.’

Charley burst out laughing the next moment to see his father’s serious face.

‘Well, really, my dear father,’ he said, as he interpreted his look, ‘how can you expect me to play the hypocrite?’

Sir Philip was troubled, but he said nothing; and soon after Charley retired to his own room, where, over a cigar, he sat turning about the various reports he had received from Branksome-street, wondering the while why none had come in the night before.

‘Nothing of sufficient importance to send in, I suppose,’ he muttered; and then he sat musing and thoughtful, reading here that Mr. Maximilian Bray went to his office, dined out at Crescent Villas, went to St. James’s Hall in the evening in company with Mrs. M. and Miss B., returned to C.V., then back to lodgings; there, that Mrs. M. and Miss B. called at Bury-street, and Mr. Maximilian Bray accompanied them to the House of Commons.

Day after day the reports were of a similar nature, all tending to show that Max was a most constant visitor at Crescent Villas, but little more.

Charley sat so long that he had to give up his projected ride, and sent a messenger with a note to say that Sir Philip and he would dine with the Brays at six, and accompany them afterwards to the opera.

They were punctual to their time; and

Laura, handsomer than ever, and most tastefully dressed, greeted Charley shrinkingly, while, going up to Sir Philip, there was something very winning in the way in which she offered him her cheek, and the old gentleman saluted her.

‘Nelly come back?’ said Charley quietly, as he took Laura down to dinner.

‘No,’ said Laura ; and as she spoke, there was a tremor in her arm. ‘I am to meet her to-morrow at Paddington-station. I thought perhaps—’

‘I would go with you,’ said Charley smilingly. ‘To be sure I will. What train?’

‘Fifty-five minutes past four,’ said Laura huskily.

‘I’ll be with you,’ said Charley, ‘at, say, four or half-past three. I want to see her again.’

Laura looked now pale, now flushed ;

and Sir Philip told her she had never appeared more handsome. Then, the dinner past, the carriage arrived, and they were driven to the Haymarket. Sir Philip had passed in with Mrs. Bray, and Charley was handing out Laura, when he felt a slight touch on the arm, and a note was passed into his hand; but the bearer, unless it was the stolid policeman at his side, had disappeared.

In spite of himself, Charley uttered a faint ejaculation of surprise as he took the note, and then looked round for the giver; and this was not lost upon Laura, who directly became fearfully agitated, leaning heavily upon his arm, so that he was compelled to half carry her into the crush-room.

‘It is nothing; I shall be better directly,’ she whispered. ‘A sudden spasm—faintness; but it is going off fast;’ and

all the while she gazed in her companion's face with a terrified aspect, as if trying to read therein something that was certainly not visible.

‘Suppose I leave you five minutes with the attendant, and get you an ice or a cup of coffee?’ said Charley.

‘No, no!’ exclaimed Laura; ‘do not go.’

But her words were too late: he had passed through the door, staying for a moment to read the note placed in his hands.

‘Nothing last night. To night Her Majesty’s theatre. Stalls, Nos. 24, 5, and 6. Mr. M. B. and the ladies. Tickets procured at Andrews’s in Bond-street.’

A complete work of supererogation; for the next moment a voice speaking loudly made Charley shrink back, and press his crush-hat down over his eyes.

‘Bai Jove, no! Capital time, I’m sure.’ And the next moment Ella Bedford’s white muslin skirt had swept against Charley as he stood stern and motionless as a statue.

Quite five minutes had elapsed after Ella had disappeared before Charley moved. His teeth had been set, and a feeling of rage, bitterness, and hatred combined, had surged up in his breast. Had he liked, he could have stretched forth his hand and touched her ; but he did not stir. But he was himself again as he felt a trembling hand laid upon his arm, and a voice that he hardly knew said softly :

‘Had you forgotten me?’

‘No,’ said Charley earnestly, as, turning, he saw Laura at his elbow, very pale, and with a strange shiver passing from time to time through her frame.

‘Are you unwell?’ he said kindly, as he drew her hand through his arm.

‘No, no,’ she exclaimed, brightening in an instant, as she leaned heavily upon that arm, and gazed almost imploringly in his face, her great dark eyes wearing a fascinating aspect that he had never seen there before ; and thinking that he read all they would say, he turned frigid in an instant, and led her to the corridor, whence they were soon ushered into the private box.

But Charley Vining had not read those beseeching eyes. The interpretation was not for him then, or, in his mad anger, woman though she was, he would have dashed her to the ground, and fled from her as from something too hideous to live upon this earth. He did not read them then, for the key was not his ; but, satisfied in his own mind that she was agitated on his account, he was coldly polite all through the first act.

CHAPTER XXVI.

TREMBLING.

DISTURBED as Laura evidently was by some powerful motive, it was not long before her eye rested upon the occupants of the stalls immediately below, but two or three tiers nearer the stage. It almost seemed as if, as they sat side by side, she and Charley had seen them at the same moment; for involuntarily they both leaned forward, but only to draw back the next instant for eye to meet eye.

Surely enough, there was Max Bray seated between Mrs. Marter and Ella Bedford, who, with their backs to them, had not seen the occupants of the private box. As for Mrs. Bray, she had preferred a back

seat, in which she was followed by Sir Philip, who insisted upon Charley taking the front, he caring very little now for the opera; while Mrs. Bray found much more gratification in the ladies' dresses than in what she called, in private, 'a parcel of squalling,' and employed her lorgnette accordingly.

Laura's next act was to glance round uneasily at Mamma Bray and Sir Philip; but there was nothing to fear there: their attention was taken up by the audience, and from their position it was impossible for them to see where Max and his companions were seated.

The next moment Laura's eyes were directed towards Charley, as he sat sternly, fiercely looking down again, and then, softly, tremulously, and as if even the delicately-gloved hand deprecated what it was about to attempt, she laid that hand

upon his stalwart arm, and he turned once more, frowning heavily, to encounter those great eyes, pitiful, imploring, swimming in tenderness. It seemed to him that it was pity for him, sorrow for the pain he was suffering ; and as the frown passed from his brow, he returned her gaze till her eyes sank shrinkingly before his, and the great long dark lashes fell to curtain them from his sight.

But her hand still rested upon his arm, pressing it more and more tightly ; and again her eyes were raised to his for him to read in them once more the same expression.

Yes, it must be pity, sorrow for him ; and he read them so, as, forgetful of all—opera, the hundreds around, even those in the box with them—Laura came nearer and nearer to him, till he felt her soft breath upon his cheek as she whispered :

‘Charley, I can bear this no longer.
Will you take me home?’

They rose together, and Laura whispered a few words to Mrs. Bray; the next minute they were in the corridor, and then what followed seemed to Charley like a dream—the coldness of air as they passed through swing-doors, the fastening of cloak and adjustment of hood, the descent of stairs, and the rattling of wheels; and then, with the recollection of what he had last seen—Ella Bedford’s face turned smilingly towards Max—Charley Vining was seated in a street cab, rattling over the stones, with Laura Bray still clinging to his arm, to utter his name once in a hoarse whisper, as, in spite of all he could do to prevent it, she flung herself on her knees in the rough straw, her rich evening dress forgotten, as she clung to his hand and pressed it to her burning forehead, kissed it, de-

lugged it with her scalding tears, while, as he bent over her, he could feel that her sobs shook her frame as they burst from her labouring breast.

At length, partly by a few deeply-uttered words, partly by passing his arms round and lifting her, Charley Vining had the passionate girl at his side; but only for her to cling to him, sobbing fearfully, till they neared the house.

It was barely half-past nine, and as he handed her out, he would have parted from her; but she clung to his hand, and together they went up into the drawing-room, where, once more alone, Laura threw herself at his feet, clinging to him, sobbing hysterically, imploring him to forgive her, to be lenient to her; it was all for love of him—the love she had borne him so long without a tender word in return. She accused herself of want of womanly feeling, of base-

ness, of treachery, lashing herself with fierce words in her passion, till, moved by pity, maddened by despair and disappointment, Charley Vining began to feel that he was but weak—that he was but man, after all. The icy coldness gradually melted away, and he whispered first a few words, then one arm was passed round the kneeling form.

‘Forgive me—forgive! It is all for the love of you!’ sobbed Laura with a fierceness of emotion that startled him.

‘Forgive you?’ he said; ‘I have nothing to forgive.’

And then Ella, the past, all was forgotten, as his other arm drew her nearer to him as she knelt, and the next moment, with a wild sigh, Laura’s arms were tightly clasping his neck, and her face was buried in his breast. Then a click of the door-handle, a stream of light, and Laura was upon her feet, tall, proud, and defiant.

‘Did you ring for candles, ma’am?’ said the voice of the butler.

‘Set them down,’ was the reply; and the man withdrew.

Charley had risen too, and was standing by her side.

‘Go, now,’ she said, in a choking voice; ‘I can bear no more to-night. But tell me—O, tell me,’ she cried, throwing herself at his feet, and clasping his knees—‘tell me that you forgive me!’

‘Forgive you, my poor girl?’ said Charley softly, as he bent down to her, once more to pass his arms round her lithe form, when, with a bound, she was again nestling in his breast, but with her face turned towards his, and for a moment their lips met.

The next, Laura had hurried from the room; while, with every pulse in his frame beating furiously, Charley walked down to

the hall, accepted the footman's assistance with his coat, and then he made his way out into the great deserted street, to walk staggering along like one who had drunk heavily of some potent liquor. But Charley Vining's was a maddening sense. What had he done? He had not waited for the proof. He had been weak and vile in his own sight; and as he staggered along, he anathematised himself again and again, and, as if appealing to some great power, he called upon Ella to save him from the degradation of his heart.

‘False!—false!—false to her! A coward—a scoundrel—a villain! Why was I made with such a weak and empty heart?’

Then he walked on faster and faster for long enough, not heeding where he went, but muttering still:

‘Fate, fate, fate! And I have done all

that man can do. I must submit, and I love her not. Do I not hate her — or has she conquered?’

‘Hadn’t you better take a cab, sir?’ said a rough voice; and a policeman’s hand was laid upon his arm. ‘It’s too bad, r’aly, sir; but you gents will do it. Now, only think of coming into a place like this here, reg’lar lushy, and with diamond studs and gold watches and chains shining out in the light, and asking poor starving men to steal them!’

‘I’m not drunk, my man,’ cried Charley, himself again in a moment. ‘Thank you; get me a cab. Not a savoury locality!’ and he glanced round at the dark lane and the ill-looking figures about.

‘This way, then, sir,’ said the man; and he led him into a wider thoroughfare, where, a cab being called, and the policeman substantially thanked, Charley Vining

was driven to his hotel, his brain a very chaos of doubt, despondency, and rage at what he called his baseness and falseness to his vows.

END OF VOL. II.

LONDON:

ROBSON AND SONS, PRINTERS, PANCRAS ROAD, N.W.

10

[illegible]

